MANHUNT

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JUNE, 1957

35 CENTS

Kill the Clown

BY

RICHARD S. PRATHER

•

BLOOD ON THE LAND

by

Hal Ellson

•

Also:

HELEN NIELSEN

RICHARD DEMING

HAROLD Q. MASUR

MAX FRANKLIN

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•

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MANHUNT

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MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*
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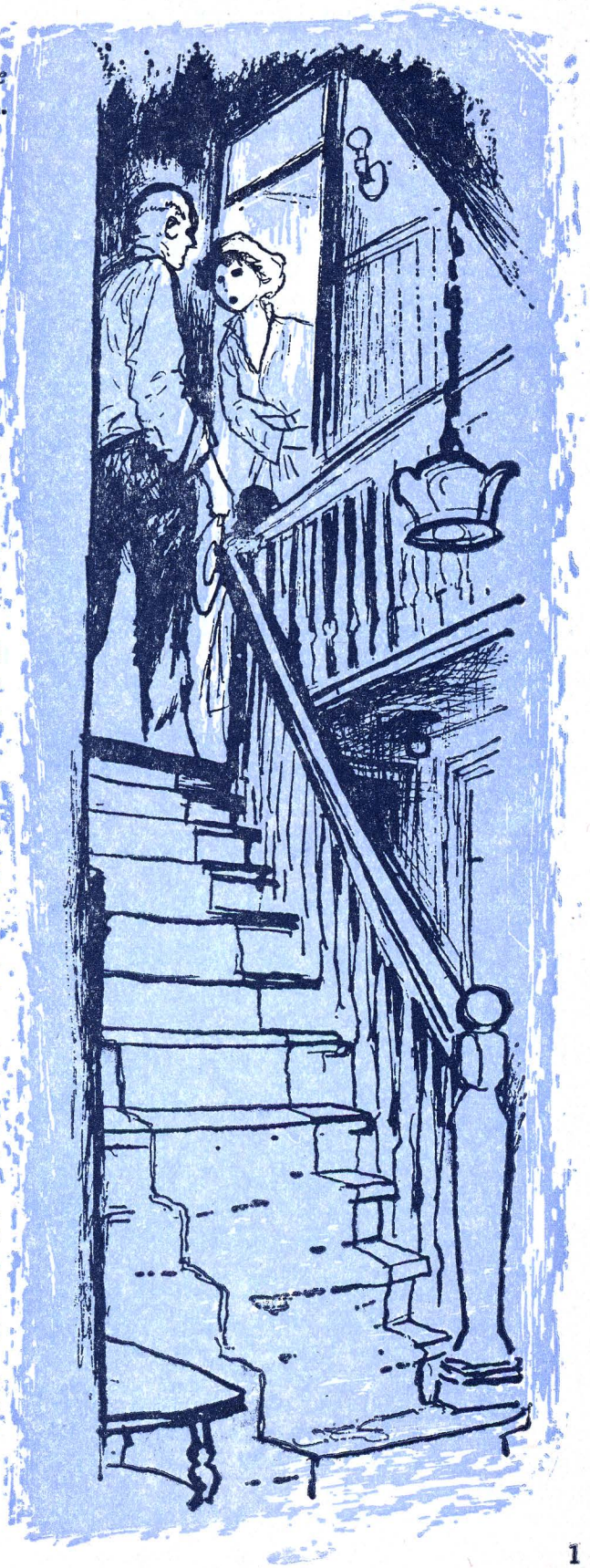
THE WOMAN-CHASERS

Ella knew that the law couldn't help her. She'd have to endure what the men were going to do . . .

by BRYCE WALTON



WHEN SHE HEARD the knock, she stood up quickly, pulled the thin housecoat nervously around her hips, across her breasts, and up around her throat. Just before she opened the door, she saw her porcelain pale, thin face in the mirror nailed to the inside, and when the door was open, she heard artificial flowers rustling in the draft.

"Miss Logan?" the police officer asked.

"Yes." She noted with disgust his bald head fringed by a half-moon of wispy red fuzz, and his armpits darkened by sweat stains. Her nose wrinkled.

"What seems to be the trouble, Miss Logan?" His eyes were faded, a bit tired. She knew his type. The odor . . .

"I explained that," she said tersely, "to whomever I spoke to over the phone this morning."

A hot wind wandered in through the front door and swooned away down the dim hallway, rustling paper curtains. The greasy smells from the kitchen of Mrs. Gracie, the landlady, were becoming positively nauseating.

She felt the hot breeze fingering her thin housecoat. She pulled it back over her thigh, remembering that she hadn't put on her panties yet.

The police officer's eyes flickered, then he wiped sweat from his upper lip with the back of a red-fuzzed hand.

"You been molested?" he asked rather timidly.

She felt the red flush burning at her face and at her tiny ears. She didn't seem to have heard this question at all. "It's those men, that bunch of men who gather around that bar on the corner. You know the one, on the corner of Maple and Elm?"

"I know the one."

She felt the nylon clinging to her damp skin. She looked the officer directly in the face as though daring him to notice anything. He moistened his lips.

"Well, Miss Logan, that's what I mean."

"I have to walk past there, down Maple, to get home after work. I work at the Lewis Dance Studio. I play piano there, you know, part time? I only work there a few hours an evening five days a week, you know."

He nodded as though he realized how important it was to know this. He blinked slowly as she bent one leg slightly and leaned against the doorjam.

"That's a dark street, and that late at night there's no bus. I want something done about those —men."

He looked at her carefully. "What do they do?"

She hated him then because she knew all too well that he was simply baiting her, wanting her to talk about it, wanting to embarrass her. She could always tell, and they would do it every time.

"How do those men bother you, Miss Logan?"

"Well—they—"

She felt her face flushing with shame. She pulled the housecoat more tightly around her, and moved her hand up and held the cloth around her throat.

"Yes, Miss Logan?"

"They—they wait for me to walk past."

"I see. Then what?"

One of Mrs. Gracie's cats squawled obscenely.

She shifted her legs, pulled the housecoat tight across her small firm breasts. "Don't you really know, officer?" she asked, her lips curling a little.

"You see, miss, there has to be some specific complaint. Like if you could tell me what they do—"

"They wait! Don't you understand? They wait and grin at me and the way they look. I know you know what they do. They say things."

"What do they say?"

"They—" She was sure she was going to faint. She didn't say anything.

"Is that all, Miss Logan?" The officer pulled at his collar.

She looked past him at the yellow wall paper. "They think things."

"They what, Miss?"

"I know what they're thinking."

The officer cleared his throat, took out a handkerchief and wiped at his thick neck. "What do they think, Miss Logan?"

She pressed at her throat, then at her left temple. There was that odd constriction in her throat. "Don't ask me that! You know what they're thinking. Of course you do. The insulting, filthy things they think."

The officer shifted his feet. "Well, there's no law against thinking. Maybe there ought to be, but there ain't. If I arrested those fellows, how could anybody prove what they was thinking?"

"You must understand," she whispered. "They won't stop there. They won't just go on thinking, they'll do something, something awful if they're not stopped now."

The officer's face was red now and damp with sweat. "Those boys aren't so bad, they aren't really. I know most of them. Sure, they cut up some, but I don't think they'll cause any trouble. I've known most of them for years. Maybe it's just the time of year, Miss."

She looked with contempt at this example of the city's finest. Her legs felt so weak, and she wanted to slam the door in his face. He smelled of sweat and he was like the others. He understood all right but he didn't care. He knew what they thought because he was thinking the same things right now.

He was probably married, and then she thought of his wife—the awful filthy things his wife must have to put up with. But she couldn't slam the door. Who else was there besides the officer now?

Her eyes closed and she concentrated simply on standing there without fainting, without starting to cry or becoming hysterical. That never did any good. She knew. It only made things worse. They liked it when you did that. She always remembered her father, the way he looked at her and grinned at her as she jumped up and down in a tantrum, crying, trying to get someone to listen to her. He laughed at her. They wanted you to put on a show like that and she refused to do that ever again.

The officer's duty was to do something about those men. She was alone. The trial of walking past that bar along that dark street every night was becoming too frightening to bear. She could feel the thoughts filling the air night and day, the dirty vile desires, nasty obscene thoughts squirming in and out of her ears like horrible little worms. Later during the hot nights, the thoughts crawled over her body in the dark like thousands of tiny insects. The dirty thoughts became whispers and little sneering laughs in the dark and the air turned stifling.

She was holding onto the officer's arm. Embarrassed, he was patting her shoulder. She didn't seem to notice that her housecoat had fallen open and that one of her breasts was almost entirely exposed. Sweat ran down the officer's reddening face. "There now, miss, it really ain't as bad as you're making it out to be. I know it ain't."

"They never stop thinking," she whispered. She dug her fingers into his arm. "You've got to help me. Some of them are going to attack me, I know."

"If any of them tries anything, he'll be taken care of, don't you worry about that. But I honestly don't think you ought to worry about those fellows, miss."

She leaned against him. "They think such filthy things," she whispered. "They're too horrible to tell anyone about."

"Well, miss, I don't—"

"Thoughts can kill too," she whispered as he patted her shoulder and moved slightly away from her. "Our high school teacher, Mrs. Williams, she said thoughts changed history. The thought is the same as the deed, isn't it?"

"Well, that's right, miss. But that's just out of our jurisdiction. The way people think, I mean."

She slid back through the door and leaned against it until it closed. The officer seemed pleased that it was closing in his face. She stumbled across the rag rug and lay face down on the couch, pressed her aching body into the flowered coverlet.

She didn't cry very much these days. It was impossible to explain how it was, absolutely impossible, even if anyone was decently interested. There were two kinds of men and the decent kind were all too rare, that was the trouble, that was the trouble all the way. The other type included practically all men, and unfortunately her father had been this type. Big, sweaty, taking off his stinking socks and lying around the house snoring all evening with that sickening sweaty smell. And the thoughts he had as he watched her. Her father, too, and she had always known the thoughts he had watching her undress. But how could you tell anybody when your own father had those kinds of thoughts about you? You couldn't, you simply could never tell anyone, could you? Of course not.

And then there was the decent type, like Mr. Chandler who used to come to the house three times a week to give her piano lessons. Tall, nice and gentle and having only sweet clean thoughts. You knew that type immediately on the few occasions when you saw one—you could always tell. You felt the same way as you did sitting alone in the dark in a movie.

Mr. Chandler had been of that type. The only one of that type in the whole town of Lakeville, Ohio. She had lived only for those three hours a week when Mr. Chandler came in to give her piano lessons. She hated the piano. She took the lessons only so she could see Mr. Chandler. She would have died then, simply dried up and died if it hadn't been for him.

There had been one or two others like Mr. Chandler. Now there was Mr. Walter Lewis, who managed the Lewis Dance Studio where she worked. She wouldn't be working there if it weren't for Mr. Lewis. He owned several other dance studios, but he came to this one three nights a week and stayed there to see how things went. He was just like Mr. Chandler. She would have left the city by this time and gone she didn't know where, except for him.

She looked at the clock. It was almost five. She had twenty minutes to get dressed and walk to the Studio. She didn't care about being late, but this was Tuesday and this was one of the evenings when Mr. Lewis would be there.

She pulled the curtains across the mirror on the door so she wouldn't see herself naked, then got out of the housecoat, slipped into her panties and bra, then her thin summer dress. She pulled the dress up around her hips and put first one leg, then the other, up on the arm of the chair and put on leg makeup, then she slid the curtains back from the mirror and put on some lipstick, just a little, and fluffed at her short damp hair.

With a kind of brittle glassy feeling, she ventured out onto the hot pavement into the needling glare of the afternoon. The air was full of bad thoughts, stifling and moist in the muggy air. She felt the thoughts as she walked past the rows of garbage cans chained together, past the broken beer bottles, past the newsdealer on the corner who leered at her, and the delicatessen man who looked at her. through the window, and the awful fat man at the vegetable stand who whispered something to her in Italian.

She played popular tunes without hearing them on the piano, while the three little girls from South Oaks tap-danced. She played waltzes for the snotty little boy and his sister who did acrobatic dancing. She played foxtrots and sambas and rhumbas and the hours drifted by in a muted noisy sweating way. Mrs. Tonnencourt, the instructress, ran about crying commands and gesticulating in her usual harried way. The kids, especially the little boys, were their usual suggestively lewd little selves.

It was nine-twenty-five and Mr. Lewis hadn't appeared as yet. At nine-thirty, he still hadn't appeared. Then it was almost eleven, and suddenly she had to stop playing the piano in the middle of a waltz, and she walked dizzily across the waxed floor. The smell of sweating bodies was too much for her sensitive nature. The sticky heat was overpowering. She was sure she would faint, and she preferred to do that alone.

She walked carefully down the hall toward the restroom. When she came out and started down the hall she ran right into Mr. Lewis. He wore his light linen suit and black tie and the light straw hat with the paisley band around the crown. His tanned strong face was cleanly shaven as always, and she smelled the familiar odor of male cologne and talc and pleasant tobacco.

"Oops," Mr. Lewis said, and started around her as though he were in a hurry.

"Well, Mr. Lewis," she said slowly. "I wondered what had happened to you."

He stared at her a moment as though puzzled, then smiled.

"Sorry, Miss Logan," he said, "but my mind was at least a thousand miles away. This is the busy time of year."

He tipped his hat. He appeared to be so cool and calm, and always so neat. A few women were lucky, like Mrs. Lewis. She was very lucky. Mrs. Lewis and her three kids out on the Island with Mr. Lewis coming home every evening.

"Mr. Lewis—"

"This is my busy day, Miss Logan. Everybody wants to dance. It must be a sign of the times."

"I wanted to ask you something, Mr. Lewis."

"Didn't I remind you once to call me Walt?"

"Why, yes, you did."

They had had warm little chats. He was considerate and always friendly with everyone. Once he bought her coffee downstairs and he listened attentively to her as she told him all about Lakeville.

He seemed in a big hurry today, but then, he always did.

"It's so hot. Isn't it terrible, Walt?"

"Almost unbearable."

Maybe he would buy her a Coke. They could talk. "I got too warm in there playing," she said. "I really thought I was going to faint or something. And thirsty—I felt like my mouth was cotton."

"You take salt tablets?"

"Why, no."

"Try it. With water."

"Walt, I'm in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I talked with a policeman just before I came to work." She told him all about her talk with the policeman. She gripped the sleeve of Walt's coat tensely. "But it didn't do any good," she said. "I mentioned it before to you, you remember, but I guess you didn't take it very seriously, and I guess I don't blame you, Walt. But it's very serious. Those men, when I walk home late at night. I'm afraid now, really afraid, and I don't know what to do."

"It's quite a problem. I didn't know it was bothering you so much, Ella." Lewis was still looking out the window. He had an odd rigid look.

"I have to come back down to Maple Street no matter which way I go, and there isn't any bus. And whether I walk past that bar or not—that doesn't matter so much now. One of them—I don't know which one—I know one of them has been following me at nights."

"They have?"

"I could move, or quit my job here, Walt. But I don't think it's right to knuckle under."

"No, it isn't," Lewis said, frowning. "Isn't right to knuckle under."

"Walt." She moved nearer to him. "You see, I know what they're thinking. And I'm afraid of them, all of them. I know what they want to do to me. I told you—I'm so ashamed to talk about it. But I want to tell someone."

She saw a very slight inoffensive line of sweat running down the side of his tanned cheek.

"I'm really in a hurry, Ella." He walked away, smiling. He went through the office door and shut it.

She had difficulty this time walking past the bar. They were standing out there in front the way they always did. She usually walked faster as she went by, but this time it was like one of those nightmare dreams where you can only move in slow motion. It seemed to take her hours of shameful humiliation to get past the bar. Then she felt cold perspiration soaking her thin dress as she seemed to burst through an invisible curtain and she started walking fast, very fast, and was almost running when she reached Maple Street. The grins and whispers came after her, circling around, and the filthy thoughts everywhere.

She had walked almost the first block. She heard the footsteps. They sounded a different way, faster. Eager, she thought, and she felt the thought pursuing her, ahead of the footsteps.

She ran across the narrow dark side street and kept on running down the second block.

She stumbled and fell against the rough bark of the tree trunk. Green leaves clattered near her face and a huge moth fluttered past her eyes. She looked back, but could not see the slipper. The strap had broken. She kicked off the other shoe and ran on, feeling the heat still rising up from the baked concrete. The footsteps running hard and faster now were right behind her. The weakness came up through the dry wick of her body, became a thick dizzying whirl in her head. She felt the fingers raking, cloth tearing. She threw out her hands to feel the concrete grinding along her knees and burning in her hands and arms.

She felt herself lifted weightlessly. She seemed to be flying across the street. Like one of those small speckled winged butterflies she had used to watch caught in a heavy wind. Trees blurred past and her body was rolling in the grass, and she knew she was in that high grass on that vacant lot near Oak Street with trees and brush all around.

She could hear cloth ripping thinly away from her and feel the hot night wind moving all over her body, and she realized oddly that she was entirely naked and lying out in the open under the sky that way. She could hear his thick panting and gasping breaths on her face and breasts, and his wet trembling hands touching her everywhere. She was gripping his hands, holding his hands to her, hardly knowing what she was doing. "Ah, ah, ah. . . ."

Noises were muted, far away, and the ground seemed soft under her. She lay limply and then sighed as she opened her eyes.

He was on his knees beside her. His face was flabby now, loose and shiny wet in the moonlight.

"Why, Mr. Lewis," she whispered. "It's you."

She reached out her hand. She tried to draw him back toward her, but he slid back away from her on his hands and knees. His face seemed to drain of color, turn pale with sudden fury.

"Why you phony little—" he said, his voice quivering. "Pretending you were so—"

"But I never—never before—"

"But you liked it, you little phony. You little phony, you *liked* it."

He jumped to his feet and ran wildly away through the brush.

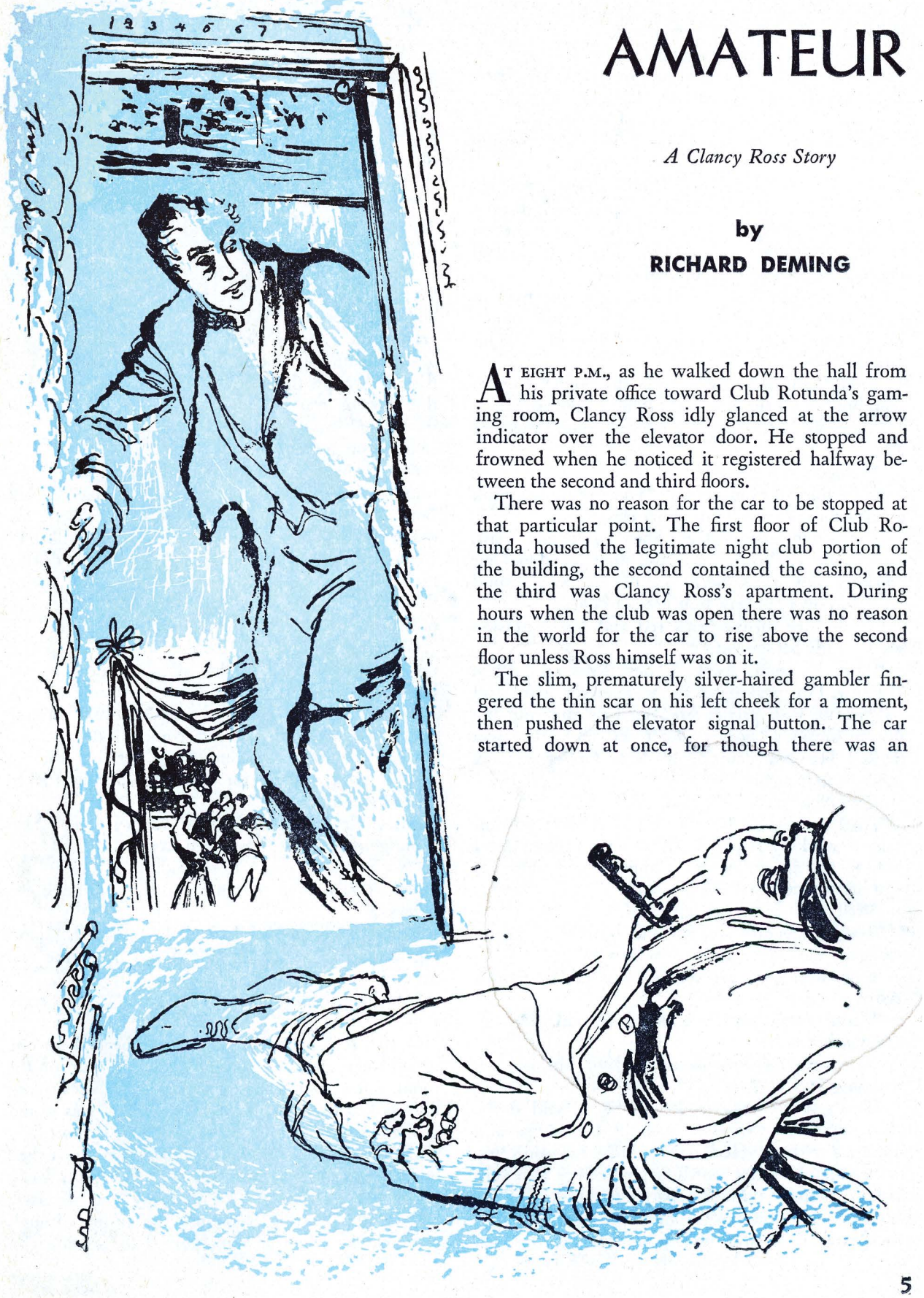
Clancy Ross didn't mind women going out with his employees. But when an employee was found dead, Ross went into action.

THE AMATEUR

A Clancy Ross Story

by

RICHARD DEMING



AT EIGHT P.M., as he walked down the hall from his private office toward Club Rotunda's gaming room, Clancy Ross idly glanced at the arrow indicator over the elevator door. He stopped and frowned when he noticed it registered halfway between the second and third floors.

There was no reason for the car to be stopped at that particular point. The first floor of Club Rotunda housed the legitimate night club portion of the building, the second contained the casino, and the third was Clancy Ross's apartment. During hours when the club was open there was no reason in the world for the car to rise above the second floor unless Ross himself was on it.

The slim, prematurely silver-haired gambler fingered the thin scar on his left cheek for a moment, then pushed the elevator signal button. The car started down at once, for though there was an

elevator attendant on duty during business hours, it was a self-operating elevator, and the signal button automatically put the car in motion.

When the elevator door slid open, Ross saw that the car contained only one person in addition to the attendant, a sultry-looking redhead with a prominent bust, which her low-cut gown left half bare. She stepped out immediately, gave the gambling-house proprietor a distant nod of recognition, and walked across the small lobby into the gaming room.

Clancy Ross placed one hand against the edge of the sliding door to hold it open, and thereby prevent it starting downward in case someone on the first floor signalled. Expressionlessly, he looked the uniformed attendant up and down.

The attendant was a good-looking young man in his mid-twenties, tanned and well-built and blond. He flushed under his employer's deliberate examination.

"Pretty well acquainted with the young woman who just got off the elevator, Eddie?" Ross asked.

"Mae? Yes, sir. We've been going around together a bit."

"She been paying the bills?"

Eddie flushed even deeper. "You mean you think an elevator operator is out of her class?"

"Just financially, Eddie. She hasn't any class. Only money. You're not the first good-looking working boy she's been on the merry-go-round with. I know of at least four previous ones."

Eddie's face turned brick red and his expression grew faintly belligerent.

Before he could speak, Clancy Ross said dryly. "I know. I'm speaking of the woman you love. And I don't run your private life. But I do run your life during business hours. Don't let me catch you parked between floors with Mae Godey or any other woman again."

In a sullen voice Eddie said, "Yes, sir."

"Another thing," Ross said. "What you do outside of working hours is your own business. But I hate to see my employees heading for trouble. Do you know that Mae has a husband?"

"Well, yes. But they're separated."

"They frequently are. It's one of those off-again-on-again marriages. Know who he is?"

"Sure, Mr. Ross. He comes in here. His name's Arthur Godey."

"I don't mean just his name," Ross said. "Do you know *what* he is?"

"Mae says he does some kind of business organizing."

"That's a good name for it," Ross said dryly. "He organizes businesses such as bookshops and numbers rackets. He's one of Bix Lawson's top lieutenants. In other words, a goon. He's also very jealous. Don't let Mae's separation fool you. She's left him four times that I know of, and she's gone back every time, after Godey took care of the men she left him for. Three ended in hospitals, the fourth just disappeared."

Eddie looked a little incredulous and a little scared. "Is this on the level, Mr. Ross?"

"On the level," the gambler assured him. "Your working for me might curb Godey's homicidal tendencies if he found out you were playing with Mae, because he knows pushing around my employees is likely to get people pushed back even harder. But don't bank on that protection. He's a pretty violent character."

"Yes, sir," Eddie said in a subdued voice.

The gambler took his hand from the elevator door, turned on his heel and entered the gaming room.

The next hour Ross spent touring the casino, keeping a supervisory eye both on the house men and the patrons. Whenever he was circulating around the gaming room, Clancy Ross had a habit of automatically noting each new customer who passed through the archway from the lobby where the elevator was. At about nine P.M. a tall, wide-shouldered man with a narrow, hawk-like face came through the arch.

Ross frowned, recognizing the man as the estranged husband of the red-haired Mae Godey. Both the gang lieutenant and his wife were frequent patrons of Club Rotunda, and ordinarily Clancy Ross didn't mind seeing either. But during their periodic separations he didn't enjoy seeing them there at the same time, particularly since one of his employees was involved with the woman.

Glancing around the gaming room, he spotted the redheaded Mae Godey standing next to the front wall halfway between the entrance to the small second-floor bar and the archway through which her husband had just come. Godey walked on into the room without seeing her, but she obviously spotted him, for she immediately turned and entered the bar.

Art Godey made straight for Clancy Ross. "Anything going tonight?" he asked Ross.

"No private game," Ross said. "I'm not in the mood. You'll have to settle for one of the house games."

The gang lieutenant looked disappointed. Glancing around restively, he said, "I feel like some real action."

"Maybe after midnight," Ross said. "It's too early now."

With a shrug the hawk-faced man headed for one of the dice tables. Ross continued his tour of the room, a few minutes later walked into the barroom and looked over the crowd. Mae Godey was seated at the bar with a drink in front of her, he noted.

Continuing on through the barroom, he exited by its other door, which led into the small lobby where the elevator was. The lobby was deserted, and he was starting back into the casino through the archway when he remembered the elevator in-

cident and glanced back over his shoulder at the floor indicator.

He halted when he saw the arrow pointed to *three,* did an about-face and angrily punched the signal button. A moment later the door automatically slid open.

For a long moment the gambler stared at the crumpled figure lying on the floor, then quickly entered the car and bent over the motionless elevator attendant. He didn't have to feel Eddie's pulse to decide he was dead. The bone haft of the hunting knife buried in his heart was enough indication.

Rising, Ross glanced into the lobby, saw it was deserted, and punched the control button marked *three.* The door slid shut, the car rose one floor, and the door automatically opened again.

Stepping from the car into the foyer of his third-floor apartment, Ross flicked the switch on the wall which immobilized the elevator at that point. After memorizing the position of the body, he lifted the dead man in his arms, carried him into the front room and laid him on the sofa. Although the corpse weighed thirty pounds more than the slim gambler's one-seventy, he performed the task without seeming effort.

Then he crossed to a small, built-in bar at one side of the room, lifted the phone setting on it, pushed one of the several buttons at its base and asked for Sam Black.

Sam Black, who managed the legitimate night club on the first floor of Club Rotunda, was also Clancy Ross's first assistant in all crucial matters. When he answered the phone, Ross said, "No more customers up to the casino until further notice, Sam. Post a man at the elevator door to keep people from pressing the button. Then come up to my apartment. I have the switch off, but I'll throw it on again in five minutes."

Sam Black exhibited no curiosity whatever. "Right," he said laconically, and hung up.

Ross pushed the button at the base of the phone which caused the phone in the second-floor bar to ring. When the barkeep answered, he said crisply, "Tell Harry to post a man in front of the elevator to let people know it's temporary out of order. I don't want anyone pushing the call button until I phone back."

"Yes, sir," the bartender said.

As there was no way in or out of the casino except by the elevator, this effectively imprisoned everyone on the second floor until Ross could get around to them.

He waited five minutes, then released the elevator car from the third floor by throwing the wall switch. A few minutes later the door slid shut and the car started downward.

When it came up again, Sam Black stepped out.

The manager of the first-floor night club was a barrel-chested, flat-faced man with a cultivated expression of stupidity. The expression was a fraud.

He watched silently as Clancy Ross again flicked the switch which bound the elevator to the third floor, then followed his employer into the front room. He examined the corpse on the sofa without expression.

"That's nice," he remarked. "Call for the trucks yet?"

"What trucks?"

"From the warehouse. To haul away the gambling equipment, so we can convert the second floor into an innocent dining room. Or don't we care any more about cops running all over the place while the games are going?"

"Cops aren't going to run all over the place."

"We're not going to call them?" Black asked with raised brows. "You did this, huh?" He shrugged philosophically. "Well, I'll get on over to the warehouse and pick up a tub and some cement. We'll take him down to the river after the club closes."

Ross said, "When I start bumping off my own employees, I'll begin with you. We're going to call the cops . . . eventually. They won't run all over the place because we'll present them with a solved crime . . . on the first floor. I found Eddie's body in the elevator. At the proper time we'll put him back, so we can't be accused of moving the body, run the car to the first floor and hand the police the victim, scene of the crime and the killer all at once. With everything on a platter, they aren't likely to be curious about the second floor."

After a pause he added, "Just to cover all bets, we'll throw the downstairs elevator switch so that the car can't move, and tell the cops it's out of order."

Sam Black said, "You know who did it, huh?"

"I have a suspicion. And I know how it was done. The car was on the third floor, and when I pulled it down, I found Eddie dead."

Black frowned. "If he was stabbed on the third floor, how'd the killer get out of the elevator? Or is he still hiding in the apartment?"

Ross shook his head. "I didn't even bother to search, because I know how it was done. Eddie was stabbed on the way up from first. When the car stopped at second, the killer simply pushed the third-floor button, then stepped out before the door closed. The car would automatically rise to three."

Black thought this over and nodded. "So it could be any of the hundred or so customers in the casino."

The slim gambler smiled. "Not quite. I've been in the gaming room for the past hour, and I've watched every new patron who came in. Art Godey was the last. I spoke to him, and I think he would have mentioned it if he'd found the elevator attendant already dead when he got on the car."

Sam Black's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. "Bix Lawson's lieutenant? Why would he kill Eddie?"

"Eddie was Mae's latest boy friend."

The night club manager shook his head wonderingly. "What some guys won't risk for a piece of fluff. Didn't the damned fool know what Art does to rivals?"

"Apparently not till tonight. I warned him when I found out he was playing with Mae."

Black suddenly frowned at the sofa, bent over the corpse and examined the bone haft of the knife. "You take a good look at this, Clancy?"

"You mean the silver skull imbedded in the bone? Yeah. Ought to make it easy for the cops to trace to the owner. It's certainly individual enough."

Straightening, Black asked, "So what do we do?"

"Have a little talk with Godey first," Ross said.

He headed for the elevator with Black following, threw the releasing switch and stepped into the car. When they got off at second, they found two couples and a lone man waiting in the lobby for the elevator to be repaired so that they could go home.

Ross said blandly, "Sorry, folks. It only works between the second and third floors. But they're working on it."

"Isn't there any other way out?" a portly man of about fifty accompanied by a blonde half his age asked. "Don't you have fire stairs?"

Ross shook his head.

"It's illegal not to have fire exists."

"It's a fireproof building," Ross told him. "It's also illegal to gamble."

He said to the house man standing guard in front of the elevator door, "Don't let anyone at all on the car." Then he turned to Sam Black and said, "Get Mae Godey from the bar and take her to my office. I want her in on this."

Without waiting for answers from either man, he went on into the casino, located Art Godey at a dice table and tapped his shoulder. When the gang lieutenant looked up, Ross motioned for him to follow, immediately turned and walked back toward the lobby. Godey raised one eyebrow at the gambler's retreating back, shrugged and picked up the chips before him. Dropping them into his pocket, he went after Ross.

Black and Mae Godey were already in Clancy Ross's private office when the gambler and the gang lieutenant entered. Art Godey frowned when he saw his estranged wife.

Ross genially waved to seats, seated himself on the edge of his huge mahogany desk and popped a cigarette into his mouth.

When he had lighted it and had blown out a thin stream of smoke, he announced pleasantly, "Eddie Cummings, my elevator attendant, was murdered about fifteen minutes ago."

The redheaded Mae let out a gasp and stared at Ross in horror. Art Godey's only change of expression was a sudden alertness.

"Happen to own a bone-handled hunting knife with a silver skull imbedded in the haft?" Ross asked Godey.

Art Godey's eyes narrowed. "What if I do?"

"At the present moment it's buried in Eddie's chest."

"Who you trying to frame?" Godey said, rising to his feet. "You think I'd be nuts enough to use my own knife on somebody and leave it sticking in the body?"

"Maybe it's wedged between a couple of ribs and you couldn't wrench it loose," Ross suggested. "Using your own knife wouldn't be any more amateurish than the rest of the murder plan. For a seasoned killer, I'm surprised at you, Art. You let your passion get the best of your judgment."

The gang lieutenant took a step toward Ross with his fists clenched. The gambler's China blue eyes brightened with pleasurable anticipation. The expression seemed to dissuade Godey from his planned violence, for he dropped his hands to his sides and merely glowered at Ross.

"You thought you'd create a real puzzle by leaving the elevator on the third floor, didn't you?" Ross said. "But, like most amateurish murder plans, it didn't fool anybody for a minute. You ought to stick to your old tried-and-true method of bashing your victim in an alley, then framing an alibi a hundred miles away."

"I don't even know what you're talking about," Godey complained.

"Then I'll explain it. The killer got on the elevator, stabbed Eddie on the way up. When the car stopped at two and the door opened, he pushed the third-floor button and stepped out of the car before the door slid shut again. You thought you could lose yourself in the casino crowd, but I happened to be watching the archway into the casino. You were the last person in."

Godey said, "How do you know the killer didn't stop the car before it reached second, drop back to first and send the car up from there?"

The gambler shook his head. "With the elevator door facing right into the club? He'd have had to risk a half a hundred customers spotting Eddie's body on the car floor. The only safe place to get off was in the lobby on second."

"Well, suppose the killer didn't go into the casino then? You said you were watching the archway, not the elevator. Suppose he went into the bar? You couldn't have seen that from the gaming room."

"No," Ross admitted. "But in addition to the circumstantial evidence, you have a motive."

"What?" Godey demanded.

"I suppose you didn't know Eddie Cummings was playing with your wife?"

Art Godey snorted. "Sure I knew it. But I don't push around Mae's playthings anymore. There's been so many, I got tired."

His tone was so convincingly derisive, Ross's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, you got tired?"

"I mean I've filed for a divorce," Godey growled. "I'm tired of being married to a tramp."

"Does Mae know you've filed?"

"Of course. She's already been served papers."

Ross turned his gaze to the redheaded woman, and after a moment of weighty silence, she asked defensively, "Why you looking at me?"

"Because it just occurred to me that in the amateur field, you're a more likely candidate than Art. Even if he was consumed by jealousy, this murder is a little out of character for him. In view of your husband's announcement that he's divorcing you, you even have a motive. It's better to be a rich widow than a discarded wife. What was your reasoning? That it's hard for a wife to get away with murdering her husband, but if she can get the state to do it for her, she's in the clear?"

Godey's thin nostrils flared as he looked at his wife. "You tried to frame me, did you, sweetheart?"

Mae said in an indignant voice, "What are you all talking about? I loved Eddie. Anyway, I haven't been out of the casino since I arrived at eight P.M. You saw me get off the elevator, Clancy, and Eddie was certainly alive then."

"Yeah," Ross agreed. "But you pulled a cute angle I wouldn't have thought of if your husband hadn't mentioned the possibility of the killer entering the bar instead of the casino after he got off the elevator. You were waiting for Art to come in. I saw you standing by the wall between the entrance to the lobby and the entrance to the bar, watching for him. The instant he entered the casino, you ducked into the bar. When I saw you seated there a few minutes later, I assumed you'd gone directly to a bar stool and sat down. But you didn't, did you? You walked out the other entrance into the lobby and punched the elevator button. When the door opened, you stepped in, sank the knife into poor Eddie, pushed the number three button and stepped out again. You were back in the barroom within seconds, figuring you'd pulled the perfect frame."

"I never left the bar," Mae said in a high voice. "You can't prove I did."

"I don't intend to try," Ross said. "I'll settle for a confession."

Snuffing out his cigarette in the desk ash tray, he rose from the edge of the desk and said to Art Godey, "You realize you're tagged unless Mae takes the rap, of course. I'll give you fifteen minutes to get a signed statement out of her. I want to get this thing wound up so my patrons can get in and out, and they won't be able to use the elevator until the police cart away the body."

He motioned to Sam Black, then added casually, "This office is soundproof."

"You're not going to leave me here alone with Art, are you?" Mae asked with the beginnings of hysteria. "He'll kill me."

"No he won't," Ross assured her. "He needs you to take the heat off himself. Your appearance may be changed a little, but you'll be alive."

"But I didn't kill Eddie!" the woman screamed.

Regretfully Ross shook his head. "Amateur murderers," he remarked wonderingly. "See how long the elaborately clever plan you devised held up? Eddie hasn't been dead much over a half hour."

He opened the door and waited for Sam Black to precede him. Over his shoulder he said to Art Godey, "Just pick up the phone and press the first button when you're ready. That's my apartment. I'll bring the elevator down to pick up Mae and her written statement, and we'll deliver the corpse and the murderer to the police in one package."

"I doubt that I'll need the full fifteen minutes," Godey said. He turned toward his wife with an expression almost of anticipation on his face.

Ross pulled the office door shut behind him.

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He's Never Stopped Running

by AARON MARC STEIN

Rick didn't mind a murder or two, but he ran into something a lot worse than simple death . . .

With men Rick almost never had trouble. If a man looks tough enough and he always goes his own way, never messing with anybody unless it's some guy who's gone out of his way to get in his road, it'll be like that. He did all right with women, too, and if he ever had any trouble there, it wasn't anything that couldn't be fixed by handing the dame a slap in the mouth. Mostly he took up with them in bars and sometimes it was in a dance hall, but always he knew all the answers. Grace, however, had him off base from the very first minute.

He was working this construction job and this one time he was sent into the job office to bring out some blueprints. She was in there and she got the stuff for him and she was wearing a thin pink dress

and perfume and Rick in his work clothes and not knowing where the sweat on him stopped and the dirt began. He was standing away from her and trying to figure what he should do with his hands and that was a funny feeling for Rick, being self-conscious.

That time he told himself she wasn't for him and he worked at forgetting her, but it does look as though maybe she had other ideas about it. After that you never knew when she was going to be walking around the job except that it always seemed to happen it was Rick would have to pull over so she could get past or it was Rick had to give her a hand because she would be going across somewhere where the walking wouldn't be too good.

It was a night he was going to the movies it really started. He was fresh out of the barber shop and you know how that is. With a barber shave and the stuff they put on his hair, he was smelling pretty sweet himself. He was on line to buy himself a ticket and he happened to look back and he saw her. The way she was coming along, he thought she was going to go right on by and he wanted to say hello and he didn't know how without yelling it, so he skipped it. But then she hesitated and she looked at the posters and next thing she'd hooked on to the end of the line.

Maybe it was only his barber shop smell and not wanting to waste it, but there he was up to the window and buying two tickets. He walked back along the line and showed her the tickets, and it made him feel good that she knew him right off never having seen him before when he wasn't in his work clothes and when he had his hands and face washed. She said he shouldn't have done it and how she oughtn't let him, but he took her arm and she came off the line.

It was the kind of picture he would have walked out on half way through, but she liked it and he didn't mind staying even though she did sit all the time with her hands folded in her lap and her elbows pulled in and not touching him anywhere. Along about the time he stopped seeing the picture he laid his arm on the back of her chair and the rest of the time they were in the theater he worked at that, edging it closer all the time. His hand was within a half inch of her shoulder when they came to the place where they had seen it around. They were out on the street again without his even having touched her. That's how much she had him off base.

He did suggest a drink before he took her home and she thought that meant an ice cream soda. Because he didn't know any way to tell her it didn't, she had an ice cream soda. He did with a cup of coffee. He didn't know whether he liked the way it was going or not. To be with a girl that long and not put his hands on her even once, that was a new kick for him and he didn't understand it. He seemed to be doing all right and yet he wasn't.

Walking home, he took her arm and she let him keep it. That helped him decide. He was going to kiss her goodnight. He had to make his move sometime and what was there to wait for? It wasn't any good letting her think she was out with some high school kid who hadn't yet made his first jump out of the bees and flowers. He squeezed her arm a little and she tightened up just enough so that it brought the back of his hand close against her breast where he felt it soft and warm on his knuckles.

By the time she stopped walking and said this was it, he had been feeling perfectly natural with her. He was halfway toward reaching for her with his free hand to swing her around where she would be in his arms and under his mouth, when it hit him that they weren't in front of any house. It was this furniture store, a big one. He did swing her around, but then held her and looked down at her.

"I don't get to walk you all the way home, baby?" he said. "Why's that? Husband?"

Looking up at him, she laughed. "Silly," she said. "The light's still on in the back room. That means pop's still there and there's nobody home."

He laughed with her. "Big girl like you afraid to go home to a dark house?" he said. "No call to be afraid. You aren't alone. You've got me with you."

She wasn't afraid. It was only that she didn't have a key and with her father not home there would be no way she could get in. Rick was way off base again. He'd never imagined a girl who didn't own a latchkey and when she rattled the knob of the store door and her old man came out of the back room to open up for her, that threw Rick some more. Her father wasn't an old guy. Even under the green eyeshade he was wearing he didn't look old. For a man who wore one of those green eyeshades, he wasn't badly set up and he looked to Rick to be ten or at most fifteen years older than himself. Rick was trying to remember if he had ever thought about a dame having a father before and he couldn't remember. If dames had fathers they would either be dead or so old that nobody even thought about them any more.

She introduced him to her old man and they waited while he packed up to go home. While they waited, Rick was adding things up. The name on the store windows, the easy way Grace moved around the place—it wasn't just that her old man worked in this store. He owned it. Rick was back to not knowing what to do with his hands. He had never in his life known anybody who owned anything, not to talk to.

They went out the back way and the three of them walked over to the house together. It was no sort of walk, just through the back yard, and they said good night in the yard. That night Rick didn't make it even as far as the little back porch. He went away, writing the whole thing off. It was out of his league and he knew it.

After that, of course, when she walked around the job and it was Rick had to give her a hand across some spot where the walking wasn't good, she didn't just thank him and go on. She'd stop and talk, but Rick wasn't making any moves. All she had to do was come near him and every alarm bell he had in his head would start sounding off. This wasn't jail bait exactly, but it came too close.

Then after about a week when she asked him to come around to supper, she caught him flatfooted. He dreamed up a date for that night but then she wanted to know which night he could make it and he didn't know any answers to that one. He went around to supper. It was a nice house and all the furniture looked brand new and Rick asked himself why not with a whole big store of the stuff. After supper her old man went across to the store to work on his accounts and Rick helped her clean up the dishes. He might have kissed her that evening but, before he even got around to working toward it, she kissed him.

After that they were going steady, but it was a week or more before Rick could get over being surprised at how much she would let him love her up. He just couldn't figure where he should put her because there would be the nights when he came to the house and her old man would be across the yard working on his accounts and those nights they would be alone and everything would be warm and natural and easy. Come a night Rick took her out, though, and everything changed. Her old man never gave her the latchkey and it was always stopping by the store to see if he was still there and then it would be saying goodnight out in the yard with her old man waiting to go in and Rick not even touching her.

For a while Rick thought it was funny but that couldn't last long. It was getting him too itchy for him to laugh at it. He never knew whether he meant it to happen the way it did. It was just one of those things that had to happen like the sun coming up in the morning; and one of those evenings when her old man left them alone, it did happen. At the very last moment she made a try at fighting him off, but then it was much too late and there was never any sign Rick could read that told him she hadn't wanted it to be too late. And then right afterward she didn't reproach him or cry or anything like that. She just began talking about when they would get married as though he had asked her and she had said yes and it had all been settled between them.

It wasn't the first time a dame had pulled that one on Rick either. You laughed at them and you slapped them on the rump and they knew what the score was. If she didn't know and it was a babe who took to nagging him about it, that was one of the things a slap in the mouth could fix. This, however, was different.

It couldn't be as with others that she had made the mistake of tabbing him for a fall guy. It couldn't be that she was looking for the easy meal ticket. That job she had over on the construction, that was only for laughs. She didn't have to work, not with her old man and that store of his. These people had dough.

"Sure, baby," he said. "Sure. Sure thing."

She wanted him out of there before her old man came back across the yard and Rick wanted time to think. He kissed her hard and he left. He thought he wanted to get drunk and on the way home he stopped into a bar he liked. Somehow the whiskey didn't taste as good as he'd expected and he switched to beer. It was an off night and except for some couples in the booths out back who obviously didn't want to be bothered the place was empty.

Rick was telling himself he ought to leave town, not think about it, not wait for anything, just hop the next bus out, whichever way it was going. Although that wasn't his name for it, he knew his reflexes had been suspended too long, but now they were acting again and he couldn't be smarter than he would be if he just let them carry him along.

Maybe it was because they had been too long suspended or maybe it was because this one really was different, but something was happening to Rick that had never happened to him before. Always it had been the automatic act, the thing his muscles wanted to do and because they wanted it, he wanted it. Now he was feeling divided. His muscles wanted to hop that bus. He didn't know what he wanted.

He fell into talk with the bartender. They talked about the town and about business, about how the storekeepers were doing. It was a good town with good business. A man, he had him a little store in that town, there was a man who had it made. The bartender told him about some guys, guys they didn't know anything, not even how to wipe their noses for themselves, but these guys, they had an old man, he owned a grocery store, or maybe it was farm implements. So they go into the store with the old man and they still don't know anything but it never made any difference. The bartender offered to show Rick a dozen of these schmos, all of them driving Buicks.

"Maybe it was a time once in this country," the bartender said, "a fellow could get something started. Maybe it was once but it ain't any more. Nothing gets started anywhere now. It only gets passed on and you've got to be one of them it gets passed on to. Without that, brother, you're nowhere. Your wages go up, so everything you buy, it goes up more. You work your tail off and do you ever get ahead? Nah. You're lucky if you can even stay in the same place."

Rick didn't have more than a couple of beers, but by the time he was out of that bar, all his reflexes were dead. He had started thinking. He didn't even know who his old man was and, whoever he had been, Rick was certain of this much. He hadn't ever had anything. Rick wasn't one of

them it got passed on to. Rick was nowhere, working his tail off, and nowhere.

So here it was. This had come. Rick hadn't done anything to make it come. He hadn't planned it any more than he had planned that other thing, that one fight that started like any other fight and went along like any other fight with Rick trying to knock the other guy loose from everything he had mostly for no reason except that the other guy was trying to knock Rick loose from everything he had. Rick had never known why that one fight had to be different. He hadn't planned to cripple the guy. If he let himself think about it, he could even feel bad about that, but not too bad because it could just as easily have been the other guy who had done it to Rick. That was the luck of it and you didn't think much about luck.

Anyhow that one fight had been different and he had crippled the creep. Then the cops had had him in the station and that had been completely different. Those cops, they'd had everything under control. They didn't cripple Rick. They didn't even mark him so much that there was any of it left to show by the time they got him into court, but they had handled him all right. The way they had handled him, it made all the rest of it seem easy, even the two years in the pen.

Rick wasn't any good at thinking and he knew it. He didn't even know why all that stuff should be coming back to him now. It was years ago and half across the country and over and done with. Of course, he had never forgotten, not to forget so much that every time he just happened to see a cop the hair didn't move at the back of his neck, not so much that a cop just standing in the street and hitching up his pants didn't make him want to vomit a little because he could still see the way they had stood ringing him around and one after another in pairs they had taken their turn at him and he had known which pair would be coming at him next because they did it every time, hitched their pants up a little before they stepped out toward him.

Did he skip town or did he stay? That was what he was thinking about and none of this had anything to do with it. Leaving or staying, it was nothing to get up any sweat about. Rick couldn't even begin to count up how many towns it had been, towns he had worked in one time or another and this could be just another town. This wasn't anything special. It wasn't anywhere near as special as that town where he'd had the bad fight, or maybe it was.

This time Rick didn't want to move on. So he wasn't one of them it got passed on to. Grace was, and it was a house that was plenty big enough for three and who would keep it nice for her old man and cook for him and all if Grace went away with Rick? Her old man wouldn't want her going away and there wasn't anybody else. Anything got passed on, it would get passed on to her.

"I can be like a son to him," Rick said, thinking aloud, "except he's going to have to let me have a latchkey."

Hearing himself, he started laughing and he didn't think any more except for remembering the way she had been and thinking that it had been nice and he had never had it nicer.

The next morning he saw her at work and when his time came to knock off for lunch, she went to eat with him and it was as if that were the only way to do it. They made the eating quick and they were just going to walk along together in the sun the rest of the time before they had to go back, but Rick thought of something and they walked down to where there were stores and he wanted to buy her a ring.

She said, of course, he would, but he wasn't going to buy it in that store. Her old man would send him to a place where he would get a big discount. You didn't just go in off the street and buy something. That wasn't the way it was done. A jeweler wanted furniture and he came around to the store and got a discount. Any time they wanted something from him, the jeweler did the same. They got a discount.

"Nobody buys retail," Grace told him.

Rick grinned at her. He told himself that he was going to have to remember that. He wasn't nobody any more. It would be the same at the Buick dealer's. There would be a dealer who bought furniture and he would knock something off. This was a new world and Rick liked it.

"You've told him?" he asked.

"Yes. Over breakfast."

"How happy is he?"

"He'll get used to it."

"If he's worrying about losing you . . . ?"

"He'll get used to it."

"I wouldn't be taking you away from him. If he wants we should live in the house . . ."

"I told him. I'll stop working. Cooking for three's a lot easier than for just two."

"Then what's the trouble?"

"No trouble."

But there was. When Rick went around that evening, he knew it right away. The old man didn't break out a bottle so they could have a drink on it. He didn't clap Rick on the back. He didn't call him son. He didn't even call him Rick. He said nothing.

Rick forced it. "Gracie told you about us," he said.

"She told me. Let's not rush anything. You haven't known each other very long. You ought to know each other better."

Rick wanted to tell him how well they knew each other. He talked about the ring instead.

"Sure," the old man said, but that was all he said.

It went on that way for more than a week except that they weren't alone much any more. The old

man had stopped going across the yard to work on his accounts. He would sit with them or, if he had to go over to the store, he would find some reason why they had to go with him, like moving a display around with Rick to help him heave the stuff.

Rick felt off base again, but every time he caught Grace's eye, she gave him a look that brought him back in. He took to putting his hands on her even if her old man was watching and, when he felt like kissing her, he kissed her. Her old man never said anything. He was pretending it wasn't happening.

Rick kept reminding him about the ring, but he always said "sure" just the way he'd said it the first time and nothing ever happened. He had Rick steaming and one day Rick just went out and bought the ring—retail. He gave it to her when he was walking her home after work, and she kissed him right out in the street even though he was still in his dirty work clothes and he hadn't shaved yet and his chin was even rougher than that because he had some bits of dried mortar stuck in his beard.

Always when he walked her home that way after work, he would go as far as the store and she would go in to get the key from her old man. He wouldn't go in with her. He would go on home and clean himself up and come back later. This time she wanted him to come in with her because she would be showing her old man the ring. The old man hardly looked at the ring. He handed her the key and told them to go over to the house. He was going to lock up and he'd be right over.

He was quicker than that. He caught up with them in the back yard.

"Give it back to him," he said.

"Now, look . . ." Rick began.

"Give it back to him," her old man repeated, "and ask him about Joliet."

Rick went blind. This was why they weren't to rush anything. He'd needed time, time to hire himself some snooper to get everything dug up and laid around. Grace had the key. She went up the steps and opened the door. She held it open for him. Blindly Rick followed her and went in. She still stood holding the door.

"Come inside, pop," she said. "We'll do this without the neighbors."

"Give it back to him," her old man said, as he came in and she shut the door behind him.

"We're getting married," she answered. "I told you we're getting married."

"Not to no con, you don't. Give it back to him. I'm going to throw him out, but give it back to him first."

"You throw him out, pop, and I go with him. You won't ever see me again. You won't ever hear from me again. It'll be like you never had a daughter. I'll be . . ."

She never got to say what else it would be because her old man slapped her across the mouth hard. A couple of drops of blood showed on her lip.

Rick caught him by the shoulder and swung him around. He started a kick toward Rick, but Rick was back with his reflexes again and this was something where he knew how to handle himself. He brought his heel down fast and hard on the old man's instep and the kick never got anywhere. The old man threw a punch and Rick took it on the side of his head and came back with an openhanded slap that sent the old man reeling.

The old man caught himself and grabbed hold of a chair. He came for Rick with the chair. Rick brought his hands up to protect his eyes and getting a grip on two legs of the chair he wrenched it out of the old man's grasp and flung it across the kitchen. It crashed against a cupboard and Rick heard the dishes in the cupboard go. He went off guard for a moment looking over his shoulder toward the cupboard and in that moment the old man tried again. This time he made a kick good.

"I wasn't looking at him," Rick thought, "but I'll bet he hitched his pants up first."

He swung on the old man and now it wasn't the flat of his hand. His fists landed and they landed again. The old man went down and stayed there.

Rick turned to Grace. "I didn't want to hit him," he said. "Honest. I didn't want to."

She took hold of his arm and squeezed. "I know you didn't," she said. "It's all right. I know."

Rick started for the door. "You coming with me?" he asked.

She hesitated for a moment. "Later," she said. "I can't just leave him. I'll get him fixed up and I'll come over to your place later. Go home and wait for me."

"You're going to have to make up your mind. Him or me."

Quickly she went to him and kissed him. "I don't have to make up my mind," she said. "It's you."

"He's got it right, that about Joliet."

"I don't want to know. Go home and wait for me."

Rick went home and, waiting for her, he began wondering how she would know where to find him. She had never been around to his room and he had never told her where he lived. He began thinking that it had just been a trick to get him out of the house. He couldn't see why it shouldn't be. How could she ever know how a man could have gotten to be a con and still not be all that different from everyone else, or wasn't he all that different? His muscles were pushing him again. The next bus out of town, he belonged on that.

He had begun throwing things in a bag when she came and he forgot to ask her how she had known where to find him. Rick went on with his packing. She had told him she had chosen and now she was proving it. She would go away with him.

"Yes, darling," she said. "Yes, if we have to, but I know him. He'll come around. Once he sees it means losing me, he'll come around."

Rick said he didn't care what her old man did. He kept saying that, but steadily with less conviction because there was this new thing and it had gone into his blood. There was the house and the store and them it got passed on to. He was, after all, her old man. She should know him.

Rick stayed. They saw each other on the job every day, and every evening she came out and met him. She even went to taverns with him and she drank beer and all the time she kept saying her old man would come around. Then there was the day when she was saying, I told you so. Rick was to come to the house that night. It wasn't just that she was asking him. Her old man had told her to ask him to come. Her old man wanted him.

He went. When he came to the house it was locked and there was nobody there. He hadn't expected to find Grace. She'd told him she'd be home later. It was her night to have her hair done, but her old man wanted to talk to him alone so they could get it all patched up man-to-man before she came home.

Rick guessed he would be over in the store and he walked across. He knocked at the back door and it swung away from his knock. Startled, he bent to look at the lock. It had been smashed. It was then that he smelled the smoke. He pushed into the office. It was dark. He found the switch and the lights came on. The office was empty and he saw the blood on the desk. He was looking at the blood, trying to understand it, when the lights went. The fire had gone through to the wiring.

Rick slammed through into the front of the store. There was a sharp reek of gasoline all around him and half way down the long space the flames roared upward. They leaped toward a row of sofas and even before the flames touched them, the sofas exploded fire. In the firelight Rick saw the old man. He was lying on the floor behind the sofas and what had happened to the top of his head explained the blood on the desk.

Rick grabbed up a chair to hold in front of him and shield his face from the heat while he went forward to pull the old man out of there. The chair upholstery was wet and the fumes of the gasoline bit at his throat. He threw the chair away from him and went into it empty handed. The old man's clothes were smoldering when he reached him. Rick picked him up and ran with him blindly for the back door. He staggered into the office and, as he went through the door, he heard another explosion of fire and the heat seared his back.

Carrying the old man outside, he set him down on the grass. That was the first he thought to see whether the old man was alive. He felt for the heart and the thump of it came up under his hand. The old man stirred. His eyes fluttered open and he looked at Rick.

"You let her do it for you," he gasped. "You let her do the dirty. You could never have anything as long as I lived and nothing after I was dead either, so you had to have it this way—each other and my life insurance and the store insurance, everything. I was sorry for the both of you because you were going to have each other. Now I'm sorry for you. You didn't have the stomach to leave me in there to burn alive. My daughter—she had the stomach for it. And now you've got her."

The old man's eyes closed again and Rick brought his hand up to wipe his mouth with it. Rick wiped gasoline all over his lips. The old man's eyes opened again. They were filmed over now and, when he spoke, Rick could only barely make out the words. They were that mixed up with the noises of dying.

"God help you," the old man said.

Rick didn't wait for her to come home. His muscles took over. He started running and he's never stopped running since.

Auto Theft Dept.

A phosphate firm executive reported both his cars stolen in different cities during the same weekend.

Byron Craig, of Ocala, Fla., drove to Lake City to see a football game. His car was stolen. When he arrived back home, he found his second car had been taken from his garage as well as several valuables from his house. Police believe that the thief who took Craig's auto in Lake City found Craig's address and house key in the vehicle and went to Ocala to secure more loot.

And in Fort Wayne, Ind., a man driving his own "stolen" truck had to do some explaining after he was stopped by police. Willie Williams, the truck owner, said he had gotten the license numbers mixed when he reported his other truck stolen.

What we did was something special. Even if we did kill a man, you ought to be proud of us. After all, we're

THE GENIUSES

by

MAX FRANKLIN

EVEN after our explanation, no one seems to understand why we did it. For example, this appeared in the *Star*:

Stripped of its high-flown vocabulary, the statements of teen-age killers Barton Conway and Edward Bolling boil down to the crime being nothing more nor less than a psychotic thrill kill.

The *Star* completely missed the point that our act was an intellectual exercise, you see. They lumped Bart and me in the same class as the juvenile delinquent who carries a switch-blade knife.

Another thing we resent, or at least I do, is the newspaper attempt to make me seem a kind of stooge of Bart's. They point to Bart's higher scholastic average as proof that he was the superior and guiding intellect. But if the Stanford-Binet test means anything, actually I'm the more intelligent. My intelligence quotient is 163, while Bart's is only 160.

Both I.Q.s rate the designation of genius, of course.

Bart's grades in high school and college were higher than mine because he studied harder. Being able to draw high grades without study, it never occurred to me to work for even higher ones. Besides, Bart is competitive and I'm not. It was important to him to be the top scholar, and it wasn't important to me. I was quite content to be salutatorian of our high-school graduation class, and to let Bart make valedictorian.

Maybe this does indicate that I tended to play second fiddle to Bart, but I was never conscious of being dominated. I simply regarded him as my best friend. Because our superior intelligence set us

apart from others our own age, we were inseparable all through grade school, high school and our two years of college.

The newspapers have made a big thing of our failure to enter into campus social life, as though this indicated some psychological shortcoming on our part. We didn't participate in campus events at Rayburn for the same reason we didn't join a fraternity: because we considered both juvenile. But we had a social life of our own making.

Considering our mental attainments, it was natural for the campus intelligentsia to gather about us. It was also natural for the meeting place to be the three-room apartment Bart and I shared, for we were the only members of the group with money enough to afford an apartment. The rest were all from poor families, and lived either in dormitory rooms or rooming houses.

The so-called campus elite hardly ever visited our apartment . . . the athletes, the "activity men" or the fraternity and sorority crowd . . . but we were surrounded by young poets and writers and scholars. It was common for a half dozen or more people to be lying about on cushions in our large front room of an evening, listening while Bart played classical records, or read poetry aloud, or discoursed on anything from ancient literature to the current world situation.

It was at one of these sessions during our sophomore year that the seed for our great experiment was sown. Six of us were present that night.

Only five of us really belonged, however. The sixth was as out of place in that intellectual society as a harlot in a nunnery.

There was serious-minded Calvin Thorpe, who was majoring in philosophy, and mousy little Annabelle Stang, the hopeful poetess he went with. I had Marge Ridgeway, whom I tentatively regarded as my girl, a beautiful freshman with a golden complexion and a fine mind, for a woman. She was just my age, eighteen, though a year behind me in school.

Bart Conway, as always, presided over the group. He sat enthroned on his red-leather chair while the rest of us lolled on floor cushions at his feet, listening to him expound and watching the play of expression on his thin but sensitive face.

All of us but Herman Groper, that is. Herman was the outsider, the big, blond, over-muscled captain of our football team. He had been dragged along by Calvin Thorpe, who was tutoring him in philosophy in his spare time in an effort to keep Groper eligible for football.

Groper had refused to sit on the floor. He sat on the sofa to one side of Bart's chair with a bored look on his face.

The discussion that night had started with a murder currently in the headlines, but Bart had drifted off into a philosophical dissertation on murder in general.

"A little reasoning would show you that the old bromide, 'Murder will out,' is merely an attempt to deter potential murderers from carrying out their murderous intentions," Bart said. "I doubt that one murder in ten is ever detected."

"Statistics don't show that," Calvin Thorpe objected. "The percentage of solved cases in a city such as New York far outweighs the unsolved."

"For cases diagnosed as murder," Bert agreed. "But what about all the homicides officially accepted as suicides, accidents, or as deaths from natural causes? How many men do you suppose have given their wives a slight push at the top of a flight of stairs, and have had the resulting broken necks diagnosed as accidents? How many poisonings go undetected? How many persons listed on police blotters merely as missing are actually murder victims whose killers have so cleverly disposed of the bodies that there are no *corpus delicti*? The perfect crime isn't merely an unsolved crime. It's one in which the police never suspect a crime has been committed."

Big Herman Groper gave a bored snort. "There's no such thing as a perfect crime. The prisons are full of people who thought different."

Bart glanced at him with a frown. He had been ignoring the football captain ever since his refusal to sit on the floor with the rest of us, and now his expression indicated that he felt if Groper couldn't conform to our ritual, he shouldn't try to intrude himself into the discussion. However, since no one else spoke, Bart decided to answer him.

"That's because the average murderer is a fool," he said. "I could plan and execute a dozen murders without ever being suspected."

Herman Groper spread his lips in a sardonic grin. "Because you're a genius, I suppose?"

Bart's nostrils flared ever so slightly, an indication that he was nettled. No one can match Bart Conway's repartee, and because Groper was a guest, I decided to save him from annihilation by throwing a lighter gaff into him than Bart would use.

I said, "Of course he's a genius. You sound as though that's something to be ashamed of."

Marge Ridgeway did her bit to avert the football captain's devastation too. She asked, "Just how would you go about committing the perfect crime, Bart?"

Glancing at her, Bart's good humor returned. He said lightly, "If I told you, my redheaded doll, you might use the information in evidence against me, if I ever decided to put it to real use."

Herman Groper said, "In other words, he hasn't the slightest idea."

Bart swung back toward the blond athlete, and this time I didn't try to save Groper.

"Don't push me, my muscular friend," Bart said in a soft voice. "I just might decide to indulge in the mental exercise, and use your handsome body as a guinea pig."

Herman Groper ran his eyes over Bart's spare frame and laughed aloud. "I'm trembling in my boots."

Annabelle Stang said, "This conversation has given me an inspiration. I think I'll write a poem about death."

Shortly afterward the group broke up and I walked Marge back to the girl's dormitory. When I returned, Bart was in his pajamas and robe, smoking a bedtime cigarette.

"I think we'll start an investigation of Herman Groper's living routine tomorrow, Edward," he told me. "Suppose you cut class and follow him all day. I'll take the next day, and we'll continue to alternate until we know his exact routine."

"What in the devil for?" I asked.

"So we can sensibly plan his murder."

I looked at him with my jaw hanging. "His murder!"

"As an intellectual exercise only," he told me impatiently. "I don't actually plan to kill him. But I want to satisfy myself that I could, and get away with it."

"Oh," I said. Thinking it over, I decided this was one of the most provocative ideas Bart had produced in some time.

"It would be kind of interesting to plan the big lout's murder, wouldn't it?" I said.

2.

For the next two weeks Bart and I alternated in trailing Herman Groper everywhere he went. Both of us had high enough averages so that we could afford to miss some classes, but this period put a decided crimp in our social life. It was, of course, necessary to suspend the discussion periods at our apartment for two weeks. In addition I had to neglect Marge Ridgeway so much that she finally asked if I were angry about something.

I made the excuse that I was studying hard, but she accepted it rather coolly. As Christmas was approaching, I decided to buy her some exceptionally nice gift to make up for my neglect.

At the end of our two-week investigation we had an hour-by-hour schedule of Herman Groper's routine. He lived an extremely methodical life. He was carrying sixteen hours of work, and he never missed a class. Free periods he invariably spent at the Student Union, and he always lunched at the Chi Phi house, where he lived. Five afternoons a week he spent at football practice, and Saturday afternoon he was either playing in a game at our stadium, or at one of the other schools in the conference.

His evenings followed just as exact a pattern. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays he studied at the school library with a sophomore Tri Delt named Alice Taylor, who seemed to be his steady girl. He always walked her to the Tri Delt house when the library closed at nine, then went straight home to the Chi Phi house just up the street. On Tuesdays he met Calvin Thorpe at the library for tutoring in philosophy, and again went straight home when the library closed. Thursdays he didn't leave the fraternity house at all in the evening.

Presumably because of football training rules he didn't go out socially at all during the week. Both Saturday nights, after the game, he took Alice Taylor to a school dance, but they left early and Groper was back at the Chi Phi house by midnight, again presumably because of training rules.

Apparently he didn't attend church, for on both Sundays he didn't appear from the Chi Phi house until one-thirty. Both times he went straight to the Tri Delt house, picked up Alice Taylor, and they spent the afternoon at a show. They dined downtown afterward, spent a couple of hours at a local student hangout, and were home by nine-thirty.

Bart Conway ruefully summed up what we had learned.

"He doesn't seem to run around with his fraternity brothers at all," he said. "Every free minute he's with this Taylor woman. The problem is that he's never alone. When he isn't with her, he's surrounded by his fellow morons on the football team, or in the midst of fifty fraternity brothers at the Chi Phi house."

I said, "He's alone for a few minutes four nights a week on his way back from the library."

"Yeah, in full view of dozens of students also returning from the library, on one of the best-lighted streets in town. And even if we managed to kidnap him then, he keeps such a rigid schedule, he'd be missed almost immediately."

We brooded over the problem for a while, and finally Bart said, "Herman's the only football player Chi Phi has, isn't he?"

"I believe so," I said. "In fact I'm sure of it."

"Then when he goes home to bed at midnight on Saturday, the chances are he's the only Chi Phi in the house."

"Probably," I agreed. "Fraternity men rarely stay home on Saturday night, and most of the dances last till two. But the house mother would be there."

"And undoubtedly asleep. We could be waiting inside when he came in, force him to leave with us by the back door, and no one at all would see us."

"Force him how?" I asked dubiously. "He's an awfully big man."

"With a gun," Bart said impatiently. "My twenty-two target pistol."

"Suppose he put up a fight anyway?"

"Then we kill him right there and carry him out dead," Bart said.

I emitted a rather uneasy laugh. "You know, we sound as though we really meant to carry this out."

"Don't be ridiculous," Bart told me. "You know it's just an intellectual problem."

There was nothing more we could do in the way of planning until the following Saturday, when we decided to test our kidnap plan with a dry run. I took Marge Ridgeway to shows on both Thursday and Friday so that I could beg off from a Saturday night date. She seemed a little put out, but she didn't make any outright objection.

Both Bart and I had cars at school, but we used Bart's this Saturday night. We parked in the alley behind the Chi Phi house at eleven-fifteen, and waited another fifteen minutes.

We didn't have any trouble getting into the house. Because members come in at all hours, fraternity houses are never locked at Rayburn. We simply opened the door and walked in.

There wasn't a soul on the first floor, although a lamp was on in the huge front room. Tiptoeing up the stairs, we quietly checked every room and found all empty except one. This was the house mother's, who was sound asleep when we edged open her door and peeked in.

Actually we weren't taking any risk by this prowling. It was common for non-member students to wander into fraternity houses in search of friends who were members, and as we both knew several Chi Phis, we had it planned in advance to announce we were looking for one of them if anyone questioned us.

When we were satisfied that the house was deserted except for the sleeping housemother, we took up a vigil at the front-room windows downstairs and waited for Herman Groper to appear. We spotted him approaching the house at five minutes of midnight.

As all we had wanted was to prove the practicality of our kidnap plan, we quietly let ourselves out the back door before Groper could open the front.

When we got back home, Bart said, "Monday we'll take up the problem of disposing of the body."

"Why not tonight?" I asked.

"Because meat markets aren't open at this time of night," he said.

He refused to elaborate on this odd remark. Sometimes Bart liked to be mysterious.

At four o'clock Monday, when I got home from school, Bart was waiting for me with a small, newspaper-wrapped package.

"Let's go," he said. "We'll take my car."

"Where we going?" I asked.

"To experiment in body disposal."

He wouldn't tell me any more, and as I knew he enjoyed keeping me in suspense, I didn't persist in asking for an explanation. He drove straight to the campus and parked next to the Science Building.

As lab sessions ended at three P.M., no one was in the building except a couple of professors in their offices, both of whom glanced at us vaguely and without interest when we passed their open doors. Bart led me to the locked door of one of the chemistry labs, produced a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked in surprise.

He grinned at me. "From Professor Jacobs. I asked him if I could do a little special research on my own time, and he handed over a key like a little lamb. That's one of the advantages of being an honor student. Jacobs wouldn't trust another member of the class with a key."

Inside he closed the door behind us and walked to the hood at one side of the room. The hood was simply a sheet-metal awning suspended over a long laboratory bench and vented by a chimney to carry off chemical odors. Smelly experiments and high-degree heat experiments were carried out under the hood.

A portion of the experiment bench beneath the hood was taken up by a small electric furnace. The chamber was only a foot wide by a foot high and two feet deep, but it was capable of generating up to twenty-five hundred degrees Fahrenheit.

It was designed to receive small crucibles of fusible material, not to dispose of corpses. But we used it for the latter purpose. We burned the body of the freshly dressed rabbit Bart had in his newspaper package.

The furnace made an excellent miniature crematorium. There was nothing left of the rabbit except a small pile of powdery ashes. We disposed of the ashes by flushing them down one of the drains in the rest room just down the hall.

"There," Bart said with an air of satisfaction when the last of the ashes gurgled down the drain. "That completes our problem. The muscular Herman Groper has disappeared into thin air."

With a touch of sarcasm I said, "Small for a football star, wasn't he?"

When Bart frowned at me, I said, "I'll concede that you've demonstrated the effectiveness of cremation, but where would we obtain access to a furnace big enough to take Herman Groper's body?"

Bart shook his head in mock pity. "For a supposed genius you can ask awfully stupid questions, Edward. We use this furnace right here."

I gave him a blank look.

"We feed him to it in small sections," he explained patiently. "We dismember him in the bathtub at the apartment and carry him to the lab in small, inconspicuous parcels. We take perhaps two or three afternoons to complete the job."

"Oh," I said in a dubious tone.

Perhaps if I had sounded more enthusiastic, the matter would have ended right there, with Bart satisfied that he had solved the intellectual problem of planning a perfect crime. But we had known each other so long and so well, we were each sensitive to the nuances of meaning in the other's tone. Bart knew I wasn't satisfied with the solution and,

being a perfectionist, he wasn't either.

We didn't discuss it any more, but he was silent all the way home and moody during dinner. I had a date with Marge that evening, and when I got home about eleven, he was still brooding.

After watching me hang up my coat, he said, "You don't think we've really solved the problem, do you?"

I said, "If it satisfies you, it satisfies me."

"That's the trouble with a hypothetical problem," he said irritably. "You arrive at an answer, but there's no way to prove it's the right answer."

"We could really kill him," I said with heavy irony.

"Yes," he agreed so calmly, my stomach suddenly lurched. "That's exactly what we're going to do."

As I said, we've known each other so long, we were unusually sensitive to each other's tones of voice. I knew instantly that he wasn't joking. I knew that for his own intellectual satisfaction Bart had decided he had to commit the perfect crime in actuality.

I also knew our leader-follower relationship well enough to realize that while I might struggle against the idea for a time, in the end Bart would have his way. And that I'd help him commit real murder as docilely as I had helped him commit it in theory.

3.

I won't give a blow-by-blow account of my attempt to argue Bart out of his murder plan. It suffices to say that after two days of his countering every objection I made with logical argument, he finally wore me down. As usual when we had one of our rare disagreements, it was his persistence more than his eloquence which defeated me. I finally just gave up.

I recall that at one point Bart said, "It's not as though Herman Groper would be any loss to humanity, Edward. The man's about as unimaginative as they come. And consider the gratification of knowing that we, personally, have overcome the tremendous problem of committing a perfect crime. It will be a contest between our superior intellects and all the mediocre forces of society. How can you even hesitate at such a challenge?"

"All right," I said wearily. "When are we going to do it?"

He emitted a sigh of satisfaction. "This coming Saturday. It has to be then because Christmas vacation starts the following weekend."

Like many geniuses, I have a capacity for single-mindedness once I have reached a decision. From the moment I finally agreed to the murder, I shelved all my previous doubts and entered into the spirit of the thing wholeheartedly.

If it seems unnatural that neither of us had a single qualm of conscience once our decision was reached, you must remember that this was neither a crime of passion nor one for profit. We had nothing personal against Herman Groper. He merely presented an interesting problem, and there was no more emotion involved than if we had been presented with a difficult chess problem.

As our plans were already laid, and even to some extent pretested, there remained nothing to do until Saturday except obtain some necessary equipment. Bart bought some .22 shorts for his target pistol, and he had me purchase a set of meat-cutting tools, including a cleaver. Then we were ready for our great experiment.

Meantime, while waiting for Saturday to arrive, we attended class as usual, and we got most of our Christmas shopping done. For Marge I bought a delicate little wrist watch with a solid-gold case.

Eventually Saturday came.

Again we parked in the alley behind the Chi Phi house at eleven fifteen P.M., and slipped through the rear door at eleven thirty. As during our previous visit, we found no one there except the sleeping house mother. We took our positions at the parlor windows and waited for Herman Groper to come home.

As before, he arrived just before midnight. We waited until he had closed the front door behind him and was heading for the stairs. Then, together, we stepped from the front room into the hall.

"Just a moment, Herman," Bart said in a soft voice.

With his foot on the bottom step, the football captain turned. He looked incredulous when he saw the pistol in Bart's hand.

"Don't make any noise, and do exactly as I tell you," Bart said crisply. "If you think I won't use this, you're very foolishly mistaken."

Groper studied him with narrowed eyes, finally asked in an uncertain tone, "Have you gone nuts?"

Deliberately Bart cocked the gun, and the sound seemed unnaturally loud in the stillness of the big house. Groper's eyes widened.

"I'm not making any noise," he said. "What do you want?"

"Move that way," Bart said, gesturing down the hall toward the kitchen with his pistol.

Groper hesitated, his gaze shifting from Bart to me and back again. Then he paled slightly when Bart allowed his finger to begin whitening on the trigger.

"For God's sake, don't shoot!" he said quickly. "I'll do what you say."

We took him out the back way and got him into the rear seat of the car without incident. Bart sat next to him with the gun pointed unwaveringly at his head, and I drove.

There was no one on the street when we parked in front of our apartment. After I had made a

quick check in both directions, and had given the signal that all was clear, Bart backed from the car and ordered Groper to get out. I went first to open the door while Bart prodded our captive ahead with his gun muzzle.

Inside, Groper asked on a high note, "What is this all about anyway?"

"It's an intellectual exercise," Bart told him pleasantly. "Get on into the bathroom."

With more puzzlement than fear Groper followed orders. While he was treating us with a wariness indicating that he suspected he might be dealing with a pair of maniacs, I don't think that at any point he was really in fear of his life. I believe he thought the whole thing was some kind of elaborate and unfunny practical joke.

He discovered it was too late to do anything about it. The instant he stepped through the bathroom door, Bart placed the muzzle of his gun against the back of Groper's head and pressed the trigger.

Even in that confined space the sound of the shot wasn't loud enough to attract any attention from outside. It was simply a sharp crack, as though a medium-sized board had been dropped to the floor from ceiling height. Herman Groper's toppling body made nearly as much noise when it hit the tile floor.

He lay inert, a small singed place on the back of his head ringing an almost invisible dot of blood. That was the only visible sign of damage, as there was no exit wound.

Within minutes we had him stripped and had lifted his body into the tub. Then the real job began.

First we both stripped in order to avoid blood stains on our clothing. Then, with the meat-cutting tools I had bought, we proceeded to butcher the body.

Though neither of us knew much about meat cutting, we didn't have a great deal of trouble because the tools were new and sharp. I won't go into details about our revolting chore, because thinking about it still gives me a queasy feeling in my stomach. It suffices to say that we ended up with ten separate packages, each first wrapped in waxed paper and then with newspaper.

Each arm, divided into two parts, went into a separate package, the two calves and feet into another, and the two thighs into individual packages. In order to have pieces small enough to get in the furnace, we had to quarter the torso and wrap each of the four parts separately. The head made up the tenth bundle.

Spreading waxed paper and newspaper on the floor at the back of our clothes closet, we stacked the ten parcels there.

It was beginning to grow light by the time we had cleaned up the bathroom, had washed our meat-cutting tools and had each had a bath. Exhausted, we fell into bed and slept until noon.

Sunday afternoon we began the task of disposing of the *corpus delicti.* We started with the arms, each carrying one package out to the car.

The Science Building was completely deserted on Sunday, of course, so there was no danger of our being disturbed. By dinnertime we had made two trips, and both arms and both calves had been reduced to ashes and flushed down one of the rest room drains.

We suspended operations until the next day then, as we didn't want to risk anyone seeing lights in the chemistry lab and coming to investigate.

On Monday we had to wait until four P.M. in order to be sure the lab would be empty. We got in two more trips and disposed of both thighs, one section of torso, and the clothing Herman Groper had worn when he died. There now remained only the head and three sections of the torso.

Although it wasn't yet publicly known, we later learned that meantime preliminary efforts were already being made to locate the missing man. He had first been missed at two P.M. on Sunday, when Alice Taylor phoned the Chi Phi house to learn why Groper hadn't shown up for their usual Sunday-afternoon date. Both she and the Chi Phi's were more puzzled than alarmed at first, however, and the matter wasn't reported to the police until late that night.

The local police, who had had previous experience with missing students who later turned out simply to have gone on prolonged binges, or to have overstayed weekends at home, did nothing in the beginning except wire a routine inquiry to Groper's home town. It wasn't until Tuesday morning, when the missing man's football coach visited the police, that they began to take a serious interest. They hadn't paid too much attention to Alice Taylor's insistence that Herman Groper's systematic habits ruled out the possibility of the disappearance being his own doing, apparently attributing it to female hysteria. But when the coach insisted the same thing, they began to give serious thought to the possibility that there had been foul play.

They got around to Bart and me Tuesday night.

Meantime we had used Tuesday afternoon for two more trips to the lab, and had disposed of the three remaining segments of the torso. Nothing remained but the head, which we transferred from the floor of the closet to a hat box on the closet shelf, so that we could dispose of the papers with which we had lined the closet floor.

We were wrapping Christmas presents on a table in the front room when our bell rang about nine P.M. Tuesday night. Bart went to the door and came back followed by two men in police uniforms.

One was a beefy, rather stupid-looking fellow who seemed to be merely a patrolman. The other wore the gold badge of a lieutenant, which, except for the chief, was as high as police ranks went in this small college town. He was a quiet-spoken

man of about forty with a lean, intelligent face and a slow manner of moving. He introduced himself as Lieutenant Gunderson, and his companion as Patrolman Murphy.

When they had accepted Bart's invitation to sit, Lieutenant Gunderson said, "Have you boys heard about Herman Groper yet?"

We both looked at him inquiringly, and Bart said, "Rayburn's overmuscled football captain? What about him?"

"He's been missing since midnight Saturday."

"Oh?" Bart said, and waited.

"We wondered if either of you boys might have seen him."

Both of us assumed surprised expressions. Bart said, "Why do you ask us? We barely know the fellow. He has fifty fraternity brothers more likely to know where he is than we are."

In no particular tone Gunderson said, "There's some suspicion that he might have met with foul play."

A long silence ensued before Bart said in an ascending voice, "And you suspect us?"

"Suspect is a little too strong a word," the lieutenant said. "Let's say we just wonder if you decided to carry out your brag that you could commit a perfect crime."

I felt the hair rise along the back of my neck. Bart appeared momentarily speechless. When he finally found his voice, it came out unusually high.

"What brag was that?"

"The one you made one evening when Herman Groper was here at one of your bull sessions. You bragged that you were capable of committing a perfect crime, and suggested you might use Groper as your guinea pig."

"Who told you that?"

"Groper's girl friend. Alice Taylor."

I blurted, "She wasn't here that night."

Everyone looked at me, the two officers without expression, and Bart frowningly. Realizing the remark constituted an admission that Bart had made the alleged statement, I slowly turned red.

I decided to let Bart carry the conversational burden from there on.

"No, she wasn't," Gunderson agreed quietly. "But Groper told her all about it afterward. Then, several times recently, he's mentioned to her seeing an awful lot of both of you. He suggested to Miss Taylor that you might be tailing him around for some reason. Seems every time he looked over his shoulder, one or the other of you were just fading behind a tree."

So much for our expertness as shadows, I thought.

"All in all, we figured it might be worthwhile talking to you boys," the lieutenant went on. "Mind if Murphy and I take a look around your flat?"

When both of us merely stared at him, he produced a paper from his pocket and added casually, "On the off chance that you might have some objection, we brought along a search warrant."

4.

I don't know whether my expression changed or not, but my heart began hammering so hard, I was afraid the beat could be heard. If the stupid-looking Patrolman Murphy had come alone, there would have been at least a chance that he would neglect peeking into the hatbox in the closet. But I had no hope that a police officer who obviously knew his business as well as Lieutenant Gunderson would miss it.

If only we had risked a light in the lab just once, I thought despairingly.

Bart was saying in an entirely calm voice, "Go right ahead, Lieutenant. But certainly you don't expect to find Herman Groper here, do you?"

Rising, the only answer the lieutenant gave was a shrug. "I'll take this room and the bedroom," he said to Murphy. "You take the kitchen and bath."

With a nod Murphy rose and entered the small interior hall which connected with the kitchen and bath. Bart and I sat and watched Lieutenant Gunderson begin a systematic search of the front room.

After a few moments Bart rose and walked into the bedroom. Gunderson glanced after him, then followed to the bedroom door. My heart went to my throat when I heard the closet door open.

What on earth is Bart trying to do? I wondered.

The lieutenant backed from the doorway in order to let Bart re-enter the front room. I looked at Bart in horror when I saw he was carrying the hatbox in his hands.

"You don't mind if we continue with our gift wrapping, do you?" Bart asked the lieutenant casually.

Gunderson shrugged. With a bare glance at the hatbox, he went back to his interrupted search.

Carrying the box over to the table, Bart selected a large sheet of holly paper, neatly wrapped it and tied it with red ribbon. He built an elaborate bow with more ribbon and tied that on.

Momentarily pausing in his search, Gunderson said, "Pretty fancy package. For somebody special?"

"For Edward's girl," Bart said. "I have to wrap it because his packages always look as though they'd been kicked down a flight of stairs."

He glanced at me. "How about making out the gift tag?"

I suddenly realized that Bart was enjoying the dangerous situation because it gave him a chance to pit his genius against that of the police. If he hadn't been enjoying it, he would simply have wrapped the package and unobtrusively laid it beneath the table with the other wrapped gifts. But he had to drag out the drama by making an elaborate show of it.

A little unsteadily I got up, went to the table and picked out one of the stringed tags which lay there in a pile. With my fountain pen I wrote, "To Marge, with love, from Edward."

Bart tied it to the package and set the box beneath the table with the other gifts.

Murphy came into the room and said, "How about this, Lieutenant?"

We all turned to look at him, and my heart again jumped to my throat. He was holding the cleaver, bone saw and large carving knife we had used to dissect Herman Groper's corpse.

Gunderson walked over to examine the tools with interest.

"Brand new," he commented. "Now why would you boys need these things in a light-housekeeping apartment? You in the habit of buying beef by the quarter?"

We were saved from having to make an immediate answer by the doorbell ringing. This time I went to answer it, glad of an excuse to turn my face away from Lieutenant Gunderson's speculative gaze.

It was Marge who had rung the bell. She came in breathlessly, started to say, "I'm going to have to catch a midnight train home, Edward. My sister . . ."

She stopped when she saw the two policemen, and looked at me inquiringly.

When I had made introductions, Marge asked, "Is something the matter, Edward?"

"It's about Herman Groper," I said. "He's been missing since Saturday night. These gentlemen are just making routine inquiries of the students who know him."

"Oh," she said a little puzzledly. "I heard he was mysteriously missing, but I didn't know it had become a police matter." She turned to the lieutenant. "Am I interrupting you?"

"We have lots of time, Miss," Gunderson said. "But if you have to catch a midnight train, you've only got a couple of hours. Don't mind us."

"What happened?" I asked. "Is someone at home ill?"

"Oh no," she told me. "My sister's getting married very unexpectedly, and wants me for a bridesmaid. She phoned me at eight tonight. Her fiance is in the army, you know, and he's been ordered overseas. She got a call from him at noon today that he has a ten-day leave and will be home tomorrow. They want to get married at once, so they can have a few days together before they're separated for so long. I'll only have to miss three days of classes before Christmas vacation officially starts, and my averages are high enough to stand it. Can you drive me to the station?"

"Of course," I said. "Then you won't be back until after the holidays?"

"No. I didn't mean to give you this until Friday, but under the circumstances I'll have to do it now." She handed me a small, gaily-wrapped box and said, "Merry Christmas, Edward."

Turning the box in my hand, I said, "Well, thanks, Marge."

She looked at me expectantly, and after an uncomfortable silence, I walked to the table and reached beneath it for the small package containing the watch I had bought her.

When I handed it to her and said, "Merry Christmas to you, too," I was conscious of the lieutenant's gaze resting on me curiously.

"Thank you, Edward," Marge said, and immediately began to rip off the paper.

"Hey!" I said. "That's not to be opened until Christmas."

"But we won't see each other any more," she said. "I want you to open yours now too."

She finished stripping away the paper, opened the box and gave a little squeal of delight.

"Why, Edward! You shouldn't have gotten anything so expensive. It's simply lovely."

Impulsively she grabbed my shoulders and gave me a light kiss on the chin. "Open yours now."

Slowly I tore the wrapper from her gift, lifted the lid of the small box inside and gazed at the monogrammed cuff links in it.

"Say, these are handsome," I said with a smile I had to force because I was conscious of Lieutenant Gunderson's steady gaze on me. I held them out for Bart to see.

"Aren't you going to give her the other gift?" Gunderson asked in a curiously quiet voice.

If I can only prevent her from opening it now, I thought desperately. *If I can only get her to take it away with her and promise not to open it till later. Somehow I would be able to think of a convincing story to get it back from her, if only I could get past the crisis of the moment.*

Straightening with the package in my hands, I said, "This is just an extra thing, Marge. I want it to be a surprise. Let's save it till the last minute at the railroad station."

"We'll be too rushed at the station, Edward. I still have some packing to do, and it's only two hours till train time."

As she started to tear the paper, I practically shouted, "No! I want you to save it!"

She gazed at me with her mouth open. Silence grew in the room.

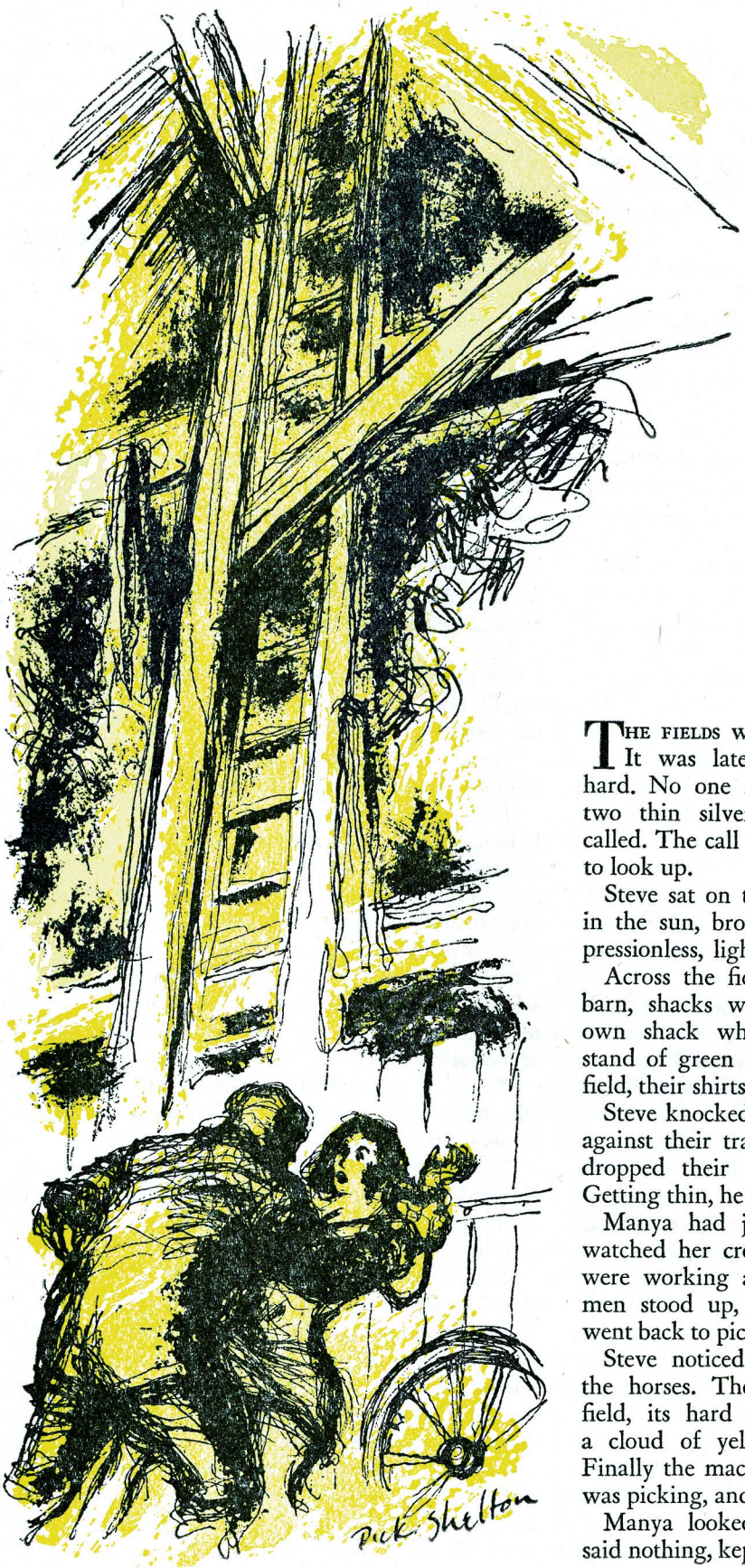
I knew from the ominous nature of the silence that it was hopeless now. While Lieutenant Gunderson couldn't possibly know what was in the hatbox, my near panic had alerted his suspicions enough to make him curious. I knew there wasn't a chance in the world that he'd allow the package to leave the apartment unopened.

Even as this hopeless thought struck me, Gunderson confirmed it by saying in a quiet but definite tone, "I think you'd better finish opening it right now, Miss."

John never stopped trying to make love to Steve's wife. And, after a while, Steve knew just what he had to do.

blood on the land

by HAL ELLSON



THE FIELDS were yellow with dust, the sky clear. It was late morning, the sun beating down hard. No one spoke. There wasn't a sound, then two thin silvery notes sounded as a bob-white called. The call came again, faded. No one bothered to look up.

Steve sat on the digger, his yellow straw shining in the sun, brown shirt dark with sweat, face expressionless, light blue eyes like two pieces of glass.

Across the fields he saw the white farm house, barn, shacks where the hands slept, orchard, his own shack white and glistening in the sun, a stand of green corn, and the hands stooped in the field, their shirts dark with sweat.

Steve knocked his pipe out, and the horses leaned against their traces. He spoke and they stood still, dropped their heads. His eyes went over them. Getting thin, he thought, and his eyes came up.

Manya had just come out of their shack. He watched her cross the field, stop where the hands were working and pick up a basket. One of the men stood up, looked at her, lit a cigarette and went back to picking.

Steve noticed that, shook his head and started the horses. The digger moved slowly across the field, its hard iron clatter breaking the stillness, a cloud of yellow dust billowing up behind it. Finally the machine reached the spot where Manya was picking, and Steve turned his head.

Manya looked up, smiled. That was all. Steve said nothing, kept the machine moving.

Now a crow rose from the oaks, flapped tiredly, and returned to the cool green shadows. Steve watched it disappear, then turned his eyes toward the bay. The water lay placid, shining, so cool-looking that he didn't dare watch too long.

Not in this heat. That was too dangerous, for sometimes the urge came to leap from the machine and plunge into the water. He would do that, or go mad, he thought, so he never more than glanced at the water.

Ready to begin on a new row, he turned the horses about when the Old Man called from the barn and started toward him. He waited, watching Manya and not paying any attention to the Old Man who came up, examined the horses and nodded his head.

"All right," he said and walked away.

Steve waited, eyes on John, the new man who'd been mining in Scranton a month ago. John stood over his basket, rolled a cigarette, then turned to Manya, said something. Even from the distance, that was apparent, and Manya answered him.

"Damn!"

He whacked the horses and they started forward; the digger began to clatter, dust rolled away from it. Steve sat forward, pipe clenched in his teeth.

The horses plodded heavily; a new strip of fresh-turned earth began to appear. The digger moved on, reached the group that was picking, stopped there.

Steve called to Manya and she looked up, left her basket and came to him. He looked down at her from the machine, face expressionless.

"What did John want?"

Manya laughed. "It was nothing. He only said it was hot, that's all."

Steve glanced at John, then suddenly whacked the horses and they lunged forward. The iron clatter started again, breaking the quiet of the fields.

None of this was lost on John. He looked up now and laughed. Old Joe, picking beside him, turned his head.

"You're going crazy with the heat now?" he said.

"No, not me. But what's wrong with Steve?"

Old Joe shrugged.

"You don't know?"

"Steve's a funny guy. Not so friendly."

"Not like Manya, hey?" John turned his eyes to her. "She's not bad at all."

"Yeah, and she's Steve's wife. You get into trouble."

"Not me. I'm too smart. But I'd like to take her into that patch of corn."

"You're crazy. You better watch your step with that Steve."

"Sure." John smiled, glanced at Manya again, then went back to picking.

The sun grew hotter, the heat-waves danced madly over the fields, the bob white was silent now. Steve swung the horses around, and the digger started back. He passed the group of hands, drove on to the barn and unhitched the horses.

Released, they thundered toward the trough and were driven from it. Punching them viciously, Steve sent them into their stalls. Once there, they seemed to wilt and he stared at them, wiped his sweating face, filled his pipe, then left the barn.

Outside, he stopped and stared across the fields at the group of hands picking in the sun. He was still standing there when the screen door slammed in the house across the road. Steve turned and saw the Old Man come out, stop and look up at the sky. These days, with no rain, that was all he seemed to do.

There's nothing up there, Steve thought, and the Old Man started toward him, hands in his pockets, the peak of his black cap shadowing his face.

"How're the horses?" the Old Man asked as he came up to Steve.

"They're all right."

"Good, but see that you don't run them into the ground. They're getting kind of thin."

The Old Man nodded, walked off to look at the horses, and Steve glared across the fields again where Manya was picking. He couldn't take his mind off her, couldn't stop thinking of the new hand. The others didn't matter, but John was young and he'd seen that look in the man's eyes when he watched Manya.

Steve was still standing there when the Old Man came out of the barn.

"What's the matter? Haven't you got anything to do?" he said.

Steve didn't answer, nor turn, and the Old Man walked away mumbling to himself.

It was almost noon, five minutes of the hour. Steve waited till the Old Man entered the house, then he climbed into the truck, started it and drove out to the fields.

The hands had already dropped their baskets and were standing now, waiting for the truck, watching it bounce along the road. When it stopped, they climbed aboard, yellow with dust from head to foot.

The truck swung around, brought them back to the barn and they climbed off like mechanical men, walked slowly to the pump to wash. That done, they lay down in the shade of the sprout-house, eyes blank and staring. The taste of dust was still in their mouths.

Steve and Manya went to their own shack. Manya put out cold borscht, bread, cucumbers and milk. Steve sat on the door-step. Finally Manya called him.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

"Too hot to eat?"

"Yes."

Manya picked up a glass of milk, came toward

him and he raised his eyes.

"Manya."

"Yes?"

"I want you to watch out for John."

"Why?"

The question stopped him. How could he explain? Words came hard to him. He knew what he knew but to tell someone else was always difficult. And with Manya it was hardest of all. She didn't know, never understood.

"Just watch out for that fellow, that's all," he said.

"But he didn't do anything."

"I said to watch out. You don't hear? You don't want to listen to me?"

The tone was warning enough and Manya didn't answer. She raised the glass of milk to her lips and tasted it.

At the sprout-house the men stood up. It was time to eat. They walked slowly toward the foreman's shack, entered it and sat down at their accustomed places. No one spoke, not a word was exchanged. There was no time for conversation, no desire.

When their plates were clean they got up and went back to the shade of the sprout-house. The older men sat on boxes and filled their pipes. John stretched on the grass and stared at the sky. No one spoke. The heat was brutal.

The hour went fast. At one, they went back into the fields, heads bent, walking slowly, like condemned men.

The sun beat down hard. The digger started up, clanked away, threw up an unending cloud of dust. It was too hot to talk, or even to think. The men worked mechanically, moving up and down the rows, filling their baskets with spuds.

Finally Steve stopped digging and brought the machine to the barn, sent the horses to their stalls, came out and looked across the field at the men. Manya was out there with them. So was John. His stomach tightened, his teeth bit into the stem of his pipe.

I've got to watch John, he thought, and the screen door slammed at the big house. He turned. The Old Man waved to him. He crossed the road and walked up the path to the house.

"Got some work for you at the sprout-house," the Old Man said.

Steve didn't answer.

"What's wrong?"

The Old Man stared straight at Steve, his eyes two cold-blue slits in his wrinkled face.

"Nothing."

"Come on then."

The Old Man started toward the sprout-house. Steve glanced across the fields, then followed the Old Man.

Late in the afternoon it grew a little cooler but not enough to matter. The dust was there yet; the heat-waves still danced madly.

Manya stood up and wiped her face. Unlike the men, she worked as she pleased, stopped when she wanted to. When the afternoons became too hot, she usually went for a swim. The Old Man never protested.

She left her basket now and started toward the sod-bank. Heads came up and watched. Some of the men exchanged grins.

She reached the embankment, climbed over it and disappeared from sight. Her shoes came off first and her feet touched clean sand. She raised her dress, pulled it over her head, flung it aside, stood naked, then started toward the water.

Back in the fields in the blinding sun, work went on, the men kept picking, but each one knew the movements of the ritual beyond the sod-bank, saw in his mind the way Manya discarded her dress, her white nakedness, her tentative approach to the cool water lapping the beach. Deep inside them beyond reach of the sun and fatigue, latent desires stirred and provoked them. In the dancing heat-waves erotic visions came momentarily to life, wavered before their eyes, faded, and came back with nebulous promises of delight.

Goaded by a wild and impossible day-dream, an older man grunted like an animal, and John stood up, straddling his basket. He lit a cigarette, gazed toward the sod-bank and sucked in his breath.

"I'm going to get her," he said.

Some of the men laughed, but Old Joe spoke in a warning voice.

"You better watch out. You get yourself in trouble."

"How? Steve ain't here. What can he do about it?"

"You see who's coming?"

John turned, saw the Old Man approaching and stooped down to his basket.

The Old Man came up a minute later, stopped, his slitted eyes moved from man to man.

"What's wrong?" he finally said.

No one answered. The work went on, and the Old Man walked away.

Steve stood in the doorway of the sprout-house, watching. He'd seen Manya go over the sod-bank, knew what thoughts her naked body provoked and went tense when John stood up. But nothing happened. The arrival of the Old Man had sent the men back to work and taken care of John. Now the Old Man was coming toward him, and Steve moved back into the sprout-house.

Refreshed, Manya came out of the water, picked up her dress, pulled it on and went back to her basket. The men glanced at her, eyes hard and glassy. It was over now, but they still saw visions dancing in the heat-waves.

At sundown they walked slowly from the fields. It was still hot and they felt the sun's glare in their heads. But no one complained. They were sullen and dumb as brutes.

Once washed, they rested, then went off to the foreman's shack, ate ravenously and returned to the sprout-house to smoke there till darkness fell. After that, one by one, they emptied their pipes, flung away their cigarettes, went to their shacks and undressed. Sleep came easily.

Next morning Steve was in the barn when Old Joe came in. Steve swung around, saw the look on Old Joe's face and said, "You want something?"

"No, I just come to tell you something."

"What?"

"You have to watch John. You know what I mean. He's all right, but he's too young, shouldn't be here. Should work in town where girls are, not here."

"He bothered Manya?"

"No. But he talks. Is young fellow, likes to talk big. You watch out for him."

Steve nodded. That was all. Old Joe walked out of the barn. Steve remained. The warning had frightened him. Watch. But how could he when the Old Man was always sending him off somewhere. He might be in another field some time and. . . .

He clenched his fists and walked out of the barn. The men were crossing the road, ready for the morning's work. The sun was just coming up. A crow cawed and broke the stillness. The men came on, reached the truck and started to climb aboard.

That evening Steve and Manya didn't come to the sprout-house. They sat at their own door and dusk fell. A cool breath of wind lifted from the bay and touched the parched earth, rustled the corn.

John didn't go to the sprout-house either. He sat in his shack with the door open, his eyes on Steve's place. The day had been long and hot, the sun had numbed his brain. But now he felt himself coming alive. His loins ached, desire aggravated him. That afternoon Manya had gone swimming again and he'd wanted to follow her. Now he taunted himself with visions of her, believed she went swimming only to goad him.

He could see her in the dusk sitting beside Steve. What were they thinking, talking about? Why didn't they come to the sprout-house?

As John asked himself the last, Steve arose and walked out to the road. John stood up, moved to the door, leaned against it and waited. The dark was falling swiftly, and Steve disappeared in the blue swirling shadows that swept the road.

John stepped from the doorway now and walked slowly out to the road, waited, then moved on to Steve's shack.

Manya was still sitting on the step. Full darkness had come and she didn't notice John till he was almost upon her.

"Back so soon?" she said, mistaking him for Steve.

"Since when did I go away?" John said with a laugh and stepped closer. His face was visible now.

"Oh, it's you," Manya smiled.

"Just taking a walk. There's nothing else to do around here."

He stared at Manya. She'd changed to a plain sleeveless dress that was cut low at the neck, and even in the dark he could see the whiteness of her skin. It made him draw his breath in sharply.

"You're new here. Where are you from?" Manya asked him.

"Scranton. Know where it is?"

"Yes. Five years ago I lived there."

"A good place to get out of," he said dropping his cigarette and crushing it out in the dust. "Steve's not here?"

"He went for tobacco."

"To that place down the road?"

"Yes."

Steve had left for the road-stand but he never reached it. A half-mile down the road he came to a stop. Manya was back there alone. Fear overwhelmed him and suddenly he turned round and started to run.

Nearing the shack, he walked again, then heard voices and quickened his steps. A shadowy figure stood near the door and he knew who it was.

John turned hearing footsteps. Steve was moving toward him. He stopped at the door for a moment, then stepped into the shack and called Manya.

She looked at John and hesitated. A gruff command from Steve brought her to her feet. She entered the shack, and Steve shut the door.

John shrugged and walked away. Behind him a yellow light brightened a window of the shack.

Steve had lit the oil-lamp. He blew out the match, stared at Manya and finally said, "What did I tell you about that fellow? Hey? You don't understand?"

"But what? He was only talking to me. There was nothing else. What are you thinking?"

Steve didn't answer. His hands went to his belt, unbuckled it, pulled it loose and doubled it up. He started toward her then, raised the belt and brought it down again and again till Manya lay whimpering on the floor.

"You got enough now?"

No answer.

He raised the belt again, and she cried out.

"So, you understand."

He slid the belt on, buckled it, then lifted her up, carried her to the bed and left her there. That done, he went to the door and stared out at the dark.

For three days Manya wasn't seen in the fields. On the fourth day, when she returned, she took her basket and worked away from the group.

But that didn't help much. Steve was still afraid.

A week later the sun failed to show. The morning was grey and damp. The afternoon brought rain, a heavy downpour, and the hands ran to the barn to wait for it to stop.

Steve was off in another field. When the rain started, he stopped working and hurried to his shack but Manya wasn't there. Almost in panic, he ran to the barn, came in and found her there, standing off to the side by herself.

"You go home," he said, and she obeyed without answering. He followed her out into the rain, passing the men at the door. They were all watching. No one spoke but everyone understood. Twenty paces from the barn, Steve heard someone laugh behind him. He knew who it was.

Next day the ground was too wet for picking, but there was other work to be done. The Old Man selected a group of men and sent them off with Steve to chop weeds in a distant field. The others, including Manya and John, were sent to pull weeds in a patch of asparagus that was going to seed near the barn.

Late in the morning it rained hard and the hands ran for the barn, waited for the downpour to slacken. When it didn't, they went off to their shacks till only Manya and John remained.

Those two stood apart, didn't speak nor look at each other for some time. Finally John turned.

"What's the matter, you don't know me any more?" he said.

Staring out at the rain, she didn't answer. Her hair was still wet, glistening. He looked at it and his eyes dropped, saw the whiteness of her throat, the firm softness of her body.

"We'll go in the back. No one'll know," he said, taking hold of her wrist.

She looked up now, frightened, but that didn't matter. He expected that, knew how to deal with it and pressed tighter on her wrist.

"Come on, I won't hurt you, and Steve's not here. No one'll come in this downpour."

She struggled, then went limp and he picked her up, saw her lip bleeding, then found himself looking into her eyes. They were like those of a small frightened animal. He laughed, started to carry her to the back of the barn and heard the sound of a motor. The truck was returning with the others.

He dropped Manya to her feet and she fled from the barn. Rain fell outside, grey and heavy. He lit a cigarette and waited.

The truck rolled up, stopped, and the men dismounted, stood in the rain and watched. Steve climbed from the cab, saw John leaning against the barn doorway and his face went white. The men waited expectantly, but nothing happened. Steve dropped his eyes, turned away and started for his shack.

John laughed. The others turned and moved off. Steve was running now. When he reached the shack, he stopped and listened. No sound came from inside. He stepped in, slammed the door behind him and called out.

There was no answer and he moved to the kitchen. Manya cringed in a corner. He went to her, grabbed her under the chin, lifted her face and saw the bruise on her lip. His hand tightened, relaxed slowly and dropped to his side. That was all. He turned away and left her in the kitchen.

The dark came early. Manya lit the oil-lamp, prepared supper and called Steve. He refused to eat, and remained silent.

It was black outside, but that didn't matter. Steve could find the barn with his eyes shut.

He moved again, found a lantern hanging from a hook, lit it and went to the back of the barn. Hoes hung from a beam. He took one down, examined it and put it back, took down another.

The blade gleamed. It was worn and filed, no more than three inches wide and sharp as a knife. The handle was short and heavy.

He took this one, hung the lantern and went out of the barn, and moved on to the cluster of shacks where the hands slept.

Cold rain struck his face but he didn't feel it. His whole body seemed numb as he moved toward John's shack.

Two steps and he was inside the shack. He stopped again, listened in the dark and heard a slow rhythmic sound below the patter of the rain.

Asleep. He's asleep, he thought, and his eyes grew used to the dark. The cot became dimly visible, the shape on it, a dark head, a shadowed face.

This was the moment and no one could stop him. He raised the hoe above his head and brought it down with full force. Then again and again till the strength went out of his arms.

He turned and walked back to the barn.

The door closed behind him. His movements were quick now. He found the hose, washed the blade of the hoe, carefully dried it with a burlap bag, hung up the tool and blew out the lantern. The door slid open, closed after him. He stepped out into the rain.

Manya was waiting. She heard him come in. He undressed, got into bed beside her and lay with his hands behind his head. She waited, then spoke his name, asked him where he had been.

"Shut up and go to sleep, you slut," he answered and she said no more but waited, then moved her hand, touched him, moved on till her arm encircled his chest.

He smiled in the dark, then listened. A wind was stirring outside and the rain fell harder now.

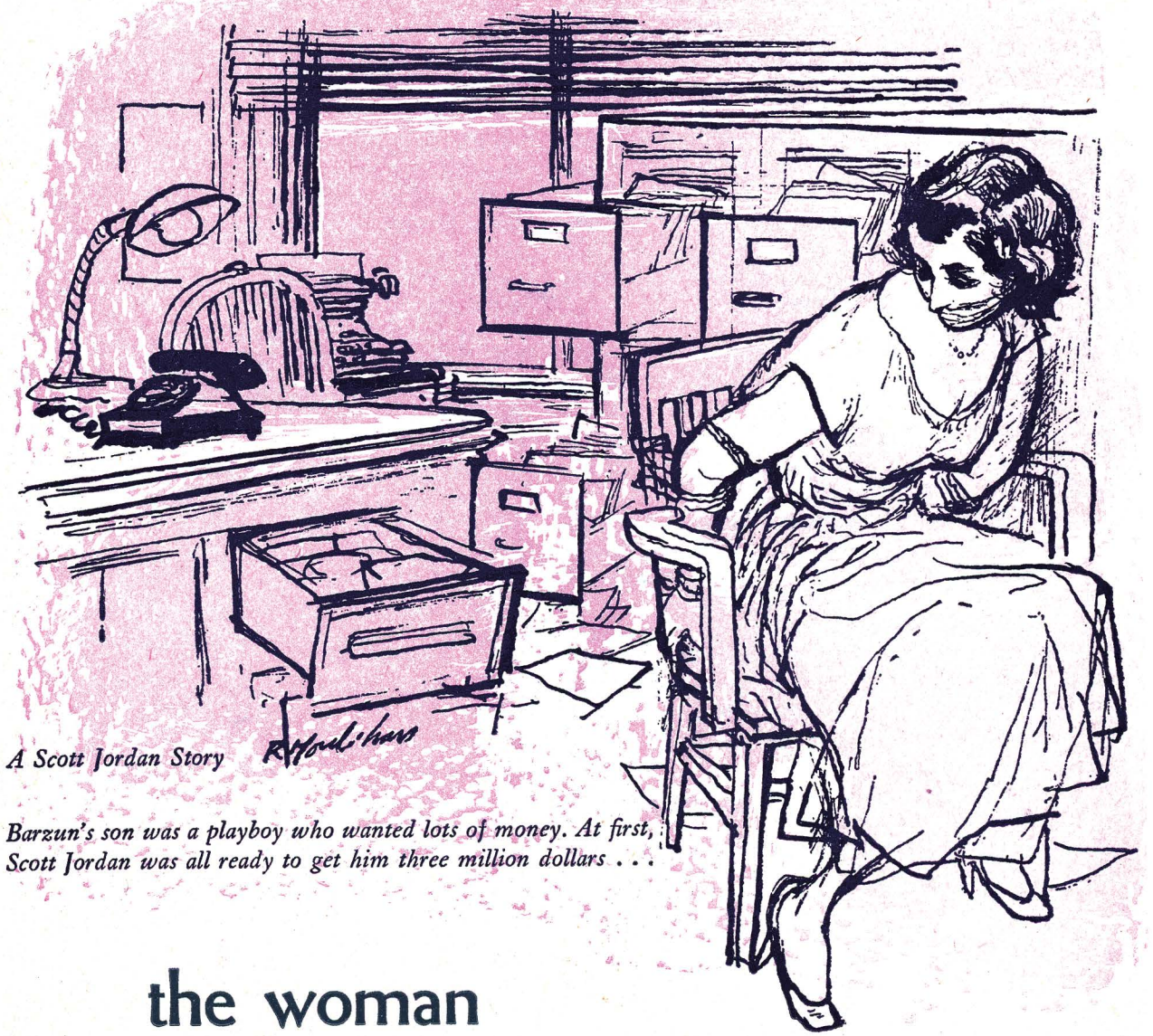
THE PRISONER was sullen, uncooperative, and downright hostile. He jabbed a finger in my chest and growled, "What are you trying to pull off, counselor? I don't need two lawyers. I already got a mouthpiece."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Your wife just called and asked me to—"

"My wife!" He snorted derisively. "That's a laugh! She took a powder on me ten years ago. She don't even know I'm alive." He wheeled to call the guard. "Hey, screw, ain't I entitled to some privacy around here? Take me back to my cell."

I didn't argue with him. I should never have got involved in the first place. He was a small time hoodlum who'd been collared while trying to put the heist on a Tenth Avenue bar. I left the Criminal Courts Building and headed back to my office. I was mad clear through. My time is valuable and I don't like practical jokes during office hours.

The reception room was empty, nobody behind the desk. Cassidy, I figured, must have stepped out for a moment. I crossed the ante-room, entered my private office, and stopped dead. There was Cassidy, sitting in my chair, fat, forty, and worth



A Scott Jordan Story

Barzun's son was a playboy who wanted lots of money. At first, Scott Jordan was all ready to get him three million dollars . . .

the woman who knew too much

by

HAROLD Q. MASUR

her weight in Harvard law clerks. Her eyes were popping, cheeks bulging, and small inarticulate sounds gurgled in her throat.

Some one had stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth and knotted another at the back of her neck. Arms, legs, and torso were lashed to the chair, holding her motionless.

I made it to the desk in one leap, grabbed the letter opener and went to work. Poor Cassidy! All her muscles, deprived of circulation, were stiff, and she could barely vocalize through parched lips. I brought a glass of water from the cooler and got her wired for sound.

"Scott!" Her voice was hoarse. "Even a steeplejack has a safer job than working in this office."

"What happened?"

"A man came in and—"

"What man?"

"How do I know? He was wearing a mask. Stop interrupting. He came in and pointed a gun at me. My heart almost stopped, I can tell you. He told me to keep still and I wouldn't be hurt. He took me into your office and tied me to the chair. Then he went out to the file room and rummaged around for almost half an hour."

"When did he arrive?"

"About ten minutes after you left."

"It figures," I said. "That telephone call asking me to go down to the Criminal Courts Building was a phony, designed to get me out of the office. For some reason somebody wanted a crack at our files. We may be in trouble. Let's check."

The filing room is a walk-in closet lined with cabinets. Some are dark green steel with ball-bearing rollers which I bought, others are ancient discolored oak inherited when I took over the practice of my old boss, Emmet Millard, long since deceased. The drawers were arranged alphabetically and only one of them, *A to B,* stuck out. Several envelopes lay scattered across the floor. We gathered them and checked, but nothing, near as we could judge, seemed to be missing.

Cassidy looked bewildered. "What do you think he was after, Scott?"

"I can't say. But I'll make a wager. We're going to find out soon enough."

Soon enough happened the following afternoon. Two o'clock to be precise. Cassidy stepped into my office and closed the door. "A Mr. Owen Barzun," she said. "Recognize the name?"

I sure did. About a week ago the Barzun name had been prominent in all the newspapers. Old Mathew Barzun, Owen's father, an eccentric octogenarian millionaire, had died, burned to death in a second floor bedroom when his Long Island mansion blazed into a holocaust, after being struck by lightning during an electrical storm. His second wife, half the old man's age, had been shopping in Manhattan, driven by the chauffeur. Owen was the product of an earlier marriage, about the same age as his step-mother.

"Show him in," I said.

She kept looking at me. "Don't you get it, Scotty? Barzun. It starts with a 'B'."

I sat erect. She was right, of course. I remembered vaguely that Emmet Millard had represented the old man in a number of matters, long before I came to work for him. And now the ancient wooden filing cabinet marked *A to B* had been tampered with. I gestured, waiting expectantly.

Owen Barzun was a tall aging playboy with beautiful manners, beautiful clothes, and a not so beautiful complexion. I knew his reputation. Water seldom passed his lips. The exclusive lubricant for his internal plumbing was alcohol, any kind. It had destroyed the veins in his face. Small red star patterns flourished along the side of his nose and high on his cheekbones. The skin was slack and pouched beneath his bilious eyes.

He introduced himself, speaking in the cultivated tones of Groton and Harvard, carefully arranging the crease in his trousers as he crossed his knees. I expressed my condolences and he shrugged philosophically.

"My father was extremely old. He lived a full rich life. Being confined to his bed these last few years had made him ill-humored and splenetic. If you ask me, I think he rather enjoyed going out in a blaze of violence."

"Nobody was able to save him?"

Owen shook his head. "The cook was out shopping. The butler and the maid too busy saving themselves. And the house itself was gutted before the local fire department reached the scene." He found a cigarette and used my desk lighter. Twin streams of smoke leaked delicately from the red-veined nostrils.

I waited for him to get on with it.

"We have a problem, Mr. Jordan. In many ways, father was a peculiar man. He kept his will in an old lock-box out there at the house. After the fire the document was recovered, charred black and completely illegible. Naturally it cannot be admitted to probate, since its provisions are unknown."

"And you think there may be a duplicate."

"Precisely. Back in the old days father's lawyer was Emmet Millard. I have been given to understand that you took over Mr. Millard's practise, that all his files are in your possession."

"Quite true."

"Then his will may be in your office."

"There is such a possibility."

"How about witnesses?"

"There we come up against a snag, Mr. Barzun. Two snags, as a matter of fact. Witnesses merely affix their signature in the presence of the testator. They rarely if ever know the contents of a will. And they seldom sign the carbon copy."

"Is there no way it can be probated?"

"That depends," I said.

"On what?"

"A number of things. It's rather complicated."

He leaned forward. "Tell me, Mr. Jordan, if there is no will, no copy, nothing, what happens then?"

"The law makes specific provisions. Your father's estate would go by way of intestacy. Roughly, one third to his widow, the rest to his children."

"Why?" It was a blurt of indignation. White lines framed the corners of his mouth, his throat swelled, and his voice rose. "She never loved him. She married him for his money. That's all she ever wanted, money, money, money." His clenched fist kept thumping my desk for emphasis. "It isn't right. She ought not to get one single penny."

What was ailing the man? I wondered. He'd never have to sell apples or stand in a breadline. Old Mathew Barzun had left about three million dollars. Owen's cut would be enough to keep him in concubines and brandy for the rest of his life.

"Complain to the legislature," I said. "They wrote the Decedent Estate Law."

The bilious eyes regarded me suspiciously. "I don't understand your attitude, Mr. Jordan. I came here to retain you as my lawyer and—"

"One second." I held up my hand. "So far you've only been asking questions. *Are* you retaining me?"

"Yes, of course." He blinked like a confused schoolboy. "I need someone to represent me. My step-mother has her own lawyer and I'm sure they are plotting against me. I haven't seen my father in a whole year. She's kept me out of the house ever since he became ill. And long before that she alienated us, told him dreadful lies about me." Shame or anger colored his face and turned it a mottled crimson. "Would you believe it, Mr. Jordan? She once told him I tried to make love to her."

I tried to remember pictures I had seen of Ivy Barzun. A small compact female, provocatively bunched, looking vital and impetuous, with a capricious mouth and raven-wing hair braided around her head like a crown.

"Did he believe her?" I asked.

"He was helpless, completely under her spell."

I stood up. "Excuse me. Be gone just a moment."

I went out to the filing room and checked the *A to B* cabinet. None of the envelopes bore the label marked Barzun. I was not disappointed. Since this was the cabinet that had been looted, I did not expect to find a carbon of the old man's will. Someone had stolen it the day before.

Owen Barzun looked up eagerly as I reentered the office. A suddenly forgotten cigarette burned itself between his lips. "Well?"

"No copy," I said.

"What do we do?"

"We have to wait. The next move is up to your step-mother. If no will or copy can be found, she has a right to ask for letters of administration. After all, she's the widow."

"Do you want a retainer?"

"Yes." I knew his mother had left him a small but adequate inheritance when she died years ago. "Five hundred dollars."

He wrote a check and signed it with a flourish. He was handing it to me when a thought occurred to him and he frowned. "My step-mother hasn't tried to get in touch with you, has she?"

"Not yet. I imagine her lawyer will contact me. Who is he?"

"Chap named Lester—Emanuel Lester."

"I've heard of him."

Owen sniffed disdainfully. "Her lawyer! He's a damn sight more than that, if you ask me. Sees her all the time. Takes her to the theatre and dancing. A woman over forty, carrying on like some cheap tramp."

"Did your father suspect?"

"Oh, they probably had him fooled. Ivy is a very smart woman. And even so, what could he do? My father was bedridden."

I finished the interview by folding his check. "Where are you staying?"

"Cambridge House. Fifty-seventh Street."

"I'll keep in touch," I said, ushering him to the door.

When he was gone Cassidy joined me and sat in the red leather chair. "Well? Was I right?"

"On the nose. Somebody swiped our copy of old Mathew Barzun's will. The original was burned in that fire last week. With three million dollars at stake there may be an all-out inheritance battle. Owen wants me to represent him."

"But you can't prove the contents of the will."

"I'm not so sure."

Vertical lines dented the bridge of Cassidy's nose. She looked at me suspiciously. "Have you been drinking?"

"No, ma'am."

"Just how can you prove the contents of a will with no copy available?"

"Look. What happens when a man decides to make his last will and testament? He goes to a lawyer. He tells his lawyer how he wishes to dispose of his property. The lawyer calls his secretary. He dictates the legal form. She transcribes her notes on the typewriter."

A light was beginning to dawn in Cassidy's eyes.

I said, "When I first went to work for Emmet Millard he had a secretary. Louise Sharon. She's a retired old lady now. Haven't seen her in years. But her mind was always keen and so was her memory. I think a visit is in order."

"Do you mean the court will accept oral testimony about the provisions of a will?"

"It might, under certain circumstances."

I got my hat and waved to her.

Down on the lower east side of Manhattan, on

municipally owned real estate, there is a neat red-brick pattern of city housing. Architecturally it resembles a series of high-class institutions. But no one can dispute the obvious improvement over former slum areas. In a small apartment on the top floor of one of these buildings, Louise Sharon lived quietly with her memories and a cat.

I heard the cat meowing when I rang the bell. Nobody came. Louise Sharon was an old lady. She might be hard of hearing, so I rang again. The cat started scratching at the door. Then I knocked, loud and sharp.

Behind me a door opened and voice said, "Yes?"

I turned. A motherly, buxom woman with a harried expression and tired eyes looked me over.

"I'm looking for Miss Louise Sharon."

"You a salesman?"

"No, ma'am. An old friend. Louise and I used to work together in the same law office. I came to pay her a visit."

The woman smiled. "How nice! Louise will be pleased no end. She seldom has visitors."

"There doesn't seem to be any answer."

"Maybe she's taking a nap. She hasn't been well. If you'll wait just a moment, I'll get the key." She turned briskly and reappeared a moment later. "I bring Louise a bowl of soup occasionally when she's out of sorts. That's why I keep the spare key, so I don't have to disturb her. I'm Mrs. Olsen."

The moment she opened the door, a gray cat flew out and went scampering down the hall out of sight.

"Oh, Louise," Mrs. Olsen called. "Wake up, my dear. Look who's here. A visitor to see you." She trundled down the corridor and turned left into a room. "You'll never believe—" Her voice choked off with a gasp. Silence for a moment. And then it came. A long, piercing shriek that echoed and ricocheted off the walls and left my ears ringing. I leaped toward the small bedroom and stopped on the threshhold.

Louise seldom had visitors, but she'd had one last night.

She lay on her back across the bed, fully dressed, white hair splayed to the floor, sightless eyes fixed on the ceiling. Her mouth was frozen in a paralyzed grimace, leaving her teeth naked to the gums. I saw two bruised thumbprints on her throat, blue and cyanosed, where someone had cruelly cut off her supply of oxygen. I stepped in and touched her wrist. It was cold.

Mrs. Olsen stood rooted, impaled to the floor, rocking and moaning inarticulately. Her lips were colorless, her face waxen. Her voice was a broken sob: "Louise . . . Louise . . ."

I took her arm and led her out of the room. "Where's the telephone?" I asked. She pointed mutely. "All right," I said. "Now go back to your apartment and stay there. The police will want to talk to you. Understand?" Her eyes were stunned and I had to aim her in the right direction. She groped her way blindly through the door.

I took a long breath and reached for the handset.

Louise Sharon had always been neat and orderly. She would have been dismayed at the sight of her apartment now. The city scientists had left it cluttered with fingerprint powder, burned-out flashbulbs, and cigarette stubs. I sat in the living room with Detective-lieutenant John Nola of Homicide West. A small dapper man, alert and precise, he kept his narrowed gaze fixed searchingly on my face.

He had been hammering at me for almost an hour.

"You're sticking to your story, are you, Jordan? Out of a clear blue sky, with no warning whatever, you suddenly decided to visit Miss Sharon. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the day you pick, the only day in the year, somebody else decides to put her on the shelf. You're asking me to believe it's a coincidence."

"Yes, sir."

Ordinarily I prefer to come clean with Nola. I seldom play it this close to the vest. He is a shrewd and perceptive cop with an uncanny ability to sweep aside the rubbish and get down to facts. But a three million dollar estate was riding on the case and I didn't want the inside story made public, not yet anyway. Whatever I could uncover on my own might help my client.

He compressed his lips, holding himself in check. "According to the medical examiner the woman was murdered some time last night. So the killer already has a fifteen hour jump on us. You know how the District Attorney feels about you. He'd pillory you in a moment if he learned that you were suppressing information helpful to the solution of a homicide. I hope you understand that."

"Yes, sir."

He flung his arm out, the gesture of a man driven to the limit of his endurance. "All right. Go on about your business." His voice stopped me when I reached the door. "Scott!"

"Yes, sir."

He blew up. *"Yes, sir!"* he mimicked. *"Yes, sir!* Sounds like a broken record. Is that all you can say? Now listen to me, Scott. You've got until tomorrow night. No later. If you don't open the bag by then, I'm going to book you as a material witness. I mean that."

He did too. Nola seldom made idle threats. I gave him one last yessir and bailed out of there quickly, before any of Louise Sharon's plaster of Paris doodads came hurtling my way.

Downstairs it was already dark and I knew that Cassidy had left the office. I found a nearby drug store and patronized the telephone booth, phoning her at home.

"Well?" she demanded. "What happened?"

"Plenty. Tell you about it tomorrow. Any messages?"

"Yes. Two people called. In person. Together. Mrs. Ivy Barzun and her lawyer, Emanuel Lester. They waited in the office for almost an hour, fidgeting as if they had epilepsy. They're anxious to see you, extremely anxious. They'd appreciate it if you'd call on them as soon as possible."

"Where?"

"Mrs. Barzun is staying at the Belmonte."

I thanked Cassidy and broke the connection.

Mrs. Barzun could afford the Belmonte. It was the proper address for a woman whose husband just died leaving three million dollars in the kitty. An upper bracket Park Avenue hostelry, the Belmonte catered exclusively to society matrons, industrial tycoons, coupon clippers, and a few members of exiled royalty. Royal purple predominated in the lobby, on rugs and upholstery. The desk clerk handled himself like an impoverished aristocrat. He phoned upstairs, announced my name, and gave me the green light.

An elevator hoisted swiftly and silently to the 23rd floor, express, and I walked along the corridor until I found the right suite. A man answered my knock.

"Mr. Jordan?"

"That's right."

"I'm Emanuel Lester. Won't you come in?"

He was tall, smooth, and slick, with crew cut hair, salted at the temples, and a Brooks Brothers suit. He had startling blue eyes, set a shade too close to his nose. He was assured, self-confident, and forceful. He had a reputation for cutting legal corners and had almost been disbarred once for allegedly bribing a juror. His voice was a fine amalgam of steel and silk, resolute in a courtroom, suave in a drawing room. He was a man to watch both ways from the middle.

The drawing room we entered was high, wide, and decorative. But the most decorative item did not come with the rent. She sat on a Louis XV love seat, managing to look regal and voluptuous at the same time.

"Mr. Jordan, Mrs. Barzun," Emanuel Lester said.

I bowed. "How do you do."

She smiled. "How do you do."

Ivy Brazun was the best preserved dish of compote I have ever seen. A combination of time and money, cosmetics and massages had hept her figure youthful, sensual, vital, desirable. She was way past the deadline for my taste, but I could imagine the pride of possession felt by an old man like Mathew Barzun. She had long dark conical eyes and a complexion like poured cream. She had an hourglass figure, bulging on top, narrow in the middle. She had lovely shoulders and glistening black hair. She had a full, protruding, inviting mouth.

She had everything a man likes to see—at a quick glance, that is. But the picture didn't quite focus on closer inspection. Her eyes, for example, were pinpointed, depthless, with a hard acquisitive quality, and there was a determined cast to her mouth. A susceptible man would be quickly dominated, practically enslaved.

I apologized for not being in my office, but said nothing about Louise Sharon. Ivy lifted an eyebrow in the direction of Emanuel Lester, letting him carry the ball.

He cleared his throat. "You've heard about Mrs. Barzun's husband."

"Yes." Again I expressed condolences. She dipped her chin slightly in acknowledgement, but I could detect neither pain nor suffering. She had lost a senile bag of bones and gained a fortune. There was no cause for wailing or despair.

Lester got us smoothly back on the track. "Mr. Barzun's will was destroyed in the fire that killed him. We're most anxious, of course, to carry out his wishes. We know that he left his entire estate to his wife."

"How do you know?"

"Because he told me," Ivy said. "On numerous occasions. He disliked his son and wished to cut him off without a cent."

"You may have trouble proving that in court."

"Precisely," Lester said. "That's where you fit in. We need your help."

"In what way?"

He didn't answer at once. He took his time lighting a cigarette, glanced at Ivy through the smoke, then came back to me. "We understand that Mr. Barzun's will was drawn by Emmet Millard and that you have the lawyer's files. Would there be a copy in your office?"

I answered flatly. "No."

He didn't seem in the least put out. "Have you looked?"

'Yes."

"No matter. You can testify in court that you read the will, that you know the contents, that everything was bequeathed to Mr. Barzun's widow."

"You mean perjure myself on the stand?"

He dismissed the word with a patronizing gesture. "Come now, Jordan. That's rather a harsh label. You wouldn't really be perjuring yourself. You'd be carrying out the wishes of the deceased."

"Wouldn't I have to swear that I read the will?"

"A mere formality."

"In my book that's perjury."

Ivy smiled, but it was strictly mechanical. "Do you know how much money is involved, Mr. Jordan?"

"Yes. Three million dollars, give or take a few grand."

"Exactly. And do you know how much your services would be worth under the circumstances?"

"Tell me."

She was too cagey. The smile stretched a little. "Suppose *you* suggest a figure."

"Okay. Half. One million five hundred thousand."

It erased the smile and she stared at me rigidly for a moment. "Surely you can't be serious."

"Ah, but I am. I always said if I was going to be crooked it would have to be for big dough. One and half million, that's big, no matter how fast you say it. Since I don't expect you people to come across I feel safe in asking."

"That's a damned impractical attitude," Lester snapped.

His own attitude had changed. He stood with his feet apart, stripped by belligerence of suavity, the muscles rippling along his jaw.

Mildly I said, "About some things I like to be impractical. At least I'll be able to rest at night. And I'll never be hauled before the Grievance Committee on disbarment proceedings."

His neck inched out of his collar and red flared in his cheeks. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that you people told the truth about one thing. That you really did know the contents of Mathew Barzun's will. But the truth ended there. He did not leave Ivy all his money. On the contrary, he left her the bare minimum. One third. But you're not satisfied. You'd like it all. So you're trying to probate a will that never existed. It wouldn't be easy to convince the Surrogate. Here in New York County he's a mighty suspicious man. But there's two million dollars at stake and two million dollars is worth a bit of trouble. People have been killed for less."

"Then you're not interested," Ivy said.

"No, ma'am."

"And you wouldn't care to do business."

"Not with you and not with your shyster boy friend."

I don't know why I said it. Maybe this whole interview had been too polite. Maybe I was itching for action. The sight of Louise Sharon with her life snuffed out had numbed my senses at first. Now there was pressure inside of me, building up, seeking an outlet. Shyster, I had called him, and no epithet is more poisonous to a lawyer.

It had the calculated effect on Emanuel Lester. Bloated veins sprang up under the skin of his forehead and sudden blood congested his face. I've known men with a low boiling point, but few with such a fast response. He never cocked his fist. It came out of nowhere and bounced against my jaw. Stars exploded behind my eyeballs and the room tilted and the floor came up, very solid under the Oriental rug.

In the ring I would have waited for the count of nine, but here time was of the essence. I saw the point of his shoe hurtling toward my head and I started to roll, knowing I would never quite make it.

"Manny!" Her voice was a whiplash of authority.

It saved me from a cracked skull. While he couldn't stop the momentum of his foot he managed to change its direction. He backed away, teeth grinding, ready and waiting.

She pitched her head sideways. "In the other room, Manny."

A muscle twitched in his jaw, but he turned and went. She sure had a bridle on him. I got up and started to follow.

"Just a moment, Mr. Jordan." Each word was distinct and coated with ice. "This is a high-class hotel, not a gymnasium. If you have any further quarrel with Mr. Lester, wait for him in the street. I'm certain he'd be glad to oblige."

I regarded her with admiration. It could have degenerated into a gorgeous Donnybrook, but she'd handled it rather neatly. I grinned at her.

"All right," I said. "It'll keep. But I'd like to give you something to chew on before I leave. There's another reason I can't do business with you. I already have a client. Your step-son. Owen Barzun. He retained me this afternoon."

She had no words.

"And nobody's going to share the estate," I went on. "One of you is going to get the whole thing. All three million."

She looked blank, shading into puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"It's the law," I said. "Nobody is allowed to reap the benefit of his own crime. You can't kill someone to inherit money."

"Mathew was not killed. His death was accidental."

"I'm not talking about Mathew. I'm talking about a woman who knew too much. A woman who remembered the contents of Mathew's will. Louise Sharon. Emmet Millard's secretary."

For a long moment she was silent, thoughts digesting in her head. And then she did a queer thing. She reached for the telephone and dialed a number. I could hear the metallic sound of an answering voice.

"Owen?" she said. "This is Ivy. Who do you think is here? Scott Jordan. He knows the contents of the will. He read it and he will testify. Of course I'm paying him an exorbitant fee, but he's worth it. Good-bye, dear." She broke the connection and looked up at me, smiling coldly. "My hospitality is exhausted, Mr. Jordan. I'm sick of the sight of you."

She rose and walked quickly into the next room. My eyes prowled the room before the door closed, but Emanuel Lester was nowhere in sight.

I walked around the block twice without encountering him.

So I walked home. I think better on my feet and I wanted to puzzle out her motives. But she was a complex woman and it was not easy. The fifteen blocks I covered wasn't nearly enough for a solution.

The light was burning in my apartment when I got home. I had a visitor and he was waiting for me just inside the door. His face was paper white and distorted, a gargoyle face, and his eyes were glazed and wildly reckless, and the yawning muzzle of his gun with its black projection of a silencer looked like an open door to hell, and right then, in that instant, I saw death staring me in the face. I was scared green and my heart suffered a violent spasm, lurching and pounding against my ribcase. He had only one shot, I knew, for a silencer jams the action of an automatic but at that distance one shot would be all he needed.

It was that very proximity that gave me a chance, although the odds were a hundred to one. I threw myself at his knees in a desperate tackle as the gun went off, its breath hot and acrid against my nostrils, and I felt a burning pain in my left shoulder, as if he'd used a branding iron.

My weight knocked him over and I fell on top of him and I grabbed two fistsfull of hair and I pounded his skull ferociously against the floor. The first blow weakened him and the second knocked him out, but I kept right on because I was a little crazy with relief and didn't realize that he wasn't fighting back.

I stood up, bitter saliva threading my throat, and I looked down at him.

Four years in the army, three islands in the Pacific, a horde of slant-eyed fanatics, screaming and dedicated, guns, grenades, bazookas, the air around you reeking with flame and thick with shrapnel, your whole world a gigantic explosion—all that I'd been through, but I felt luckier right now than at any time in my life.

I picked up his gun and I removed the silencer. I checked the cartridge and jacked another shell into the chamber. Then I got some water and poured it over his face.

His eyes blinked open and the bright glaze was gone. Now they were dull and streaked with veins. He had borrowed his courage from the loco weed, the stuff they call marijuana. Against a wispy old lady it had worked fine, but it had slowed his reflexes against sterner competition.

Looking down at Owen Barzun, I knew now why Ivy had phoned him with her cryptic message. Smart, she'd been. Very smart.

He worked his throat and his voice was a shredded whisper. "Kill me," he pleaded. "Shoot me now."

"No, sir," I told him. "That would be too easy. You're going to stand trial. You're going to be on exhibition in a courtroom. You're going to be headlined in all the newspapers. People are going to stare at you like an animal in the zoo."

He swallowed hugely and kept on staring at me.

"It was you who raided my office files," I said. "You got the name of some chap who'd been arrested from the newspapers and you got some woman to call me, sending me down to the detention cells on a wild goose chase. It gave you a chance to steal the copy of your father's will.

"You knew you'd been cut off without a cent. All that money to a woman you abominated. And then you got a break. Your father's house burned down and the original of his will was destroyed. What an opportunity! If only the copy could be destroyed too, if there was no will at all to probate, then you stood to gain at least two thirds of the estate.

"But you had to make sure. So you killed Louise Sharon. And for added insurance you came to me, sounding me out, trying to learn if I had read the copy. I hadn't and you were all set.

"But not quite.

"Ivy was too smart. She saw the truth the moment I told her about Louise Sharon. She hadn't committed the murder. She stood to inherit a million dollars no matter what happened. Why take a chance on winding up in the Ossining broiler? Whatever else she may be, she's not stupid. So she knew it was you.

"And she knew you were desperate. That's why she phoned and led you to believe that I had switched allegiance, that I was going to help her probate the will after all. She stampeded you, boy. She forced you to strike again.

"She figured I could take care of myself, and if I couldn't, what the hell, another killing would only increase the odds on your getting caught. And she'd still have her million. But it looks now like she's going to get it all. And if she doesn't, then the lawyers will get your share. And whatever is left over will go to the State after they send you elsewhere with the proper voltage."

Self-pity squeezed two fat drops of moisture from his eyes. He was beginning to disintegrate. Lieutenant Nola would have no trouble getting him to sign a confession.

I was reaching for the telephone when the doorbell rang. I went to get it and there stood the lieutenant, firm and resolute.

"Time of grace is over," he said. "I hope you're ready to talk."

"I'm ready," I said. "Come in, lieutenant."

Kill the Clown!

A

Shell Scott

Novel

by
RICHARD S. PRATHER

SHE WAS the only client who ever hired *Sheldon Scott, Investigations*—that's me—before a word was spoken. She didn't know it, but I had taken her case, no matter what it was, before she opened her mouth—and it was my mouth that opened first, anyway.

She came into my suddenly drab office like a Spring breeze visiting Winter, and closed the frosted glass door gently behind her. Then she walked up to my mahogany desk and I got a really good look at her.

And it was really good.

She had red hair like combed fire, blue eyes that were soft as whispers, and a figure that made other women seem two-dimensional.

She was a tall girl. I'm six-two, and when I stood up behind my desk her lips were only about five inches below mine, which was five inches too far, but those blue eyes seemed somehow wrong in her oval face—a little too cold and brittle, and out of place like ice in a just-right martini.

Maybe that should have warned me. It didn't.

Shell Scott simply had to get Miller out of the death cell. If he didn't, Miller's sister would never let him make a pass at her.

"You must be Mr. Scott. I hope you're free to help me. I do need help."

The voice wrapped me in a cocoon of warm words. It was like perfume made audible. It was a velvety, vibrant voice filled with promises I wanted to help her keep. My stand-up hair is white, yes; but not from old age.

"I'm Shell Scott. And I'm free. I just decided." I grinned at her as I walked around the desk and moved the deep leather chair closer to it, then went back to my swivel chair as she sat down. But she wasn't in a smiling mood.

"I'm Doris Miller," she said.

I was glad to know her name, but it didn't ring any bells.

"Ross Miller is my brother. You probably recall his name—he's in San Quentin now."

That got a tinkle. Several months ago here in L.A., one K. C. "Casey" Flagg had been murdered. He'd been a partner in the law firm of Tomkins, Borch, and Flagg, and he'd had, I understood, rather a wide acquaintance among numerous city officials and local VIPs. I'd considered him an unsavory character. Flagg had been shot to death early one evening in his penthouse suite in the Whitestone. The police had arrived soon after—in response to a phone call, apparently from somebody who'd heard the shot but hadn't wanted to give his name—and had found a young lawyer, recently employed in Flagg's office, standing over the body. The suspect had, only two days before, been in a violent quarrel with the victim, and been fired as a consequence. It had seemed an open and shut case of premeditated murder. And unless my memory had failed me, the convicted murderer's name had been Ross Miller.

I said, "Was your brother involved in the investigation into Casey Flagg's mur— death?"

She nodded. "They said Ross killed him—but he didn't. He found out that Flagg was mixed up in some kind of crooked dealing—I don't know just what it was and I don't think Ross was sure himself—and that was what they had a big argument about. Some other people heard them, and they just used that quarrel to help convict him. But he *didn't* kill that man!"

She had half risen from the leather chair. She sat back in it and went on slowly, "Ross was convicted entirely on circumstantial evidence, and the most damaging testimony against him was given by that elevator operator, Weiss. Do you remember, Mr. Scott?"

"Uh-huh." Chester Weiss was a middle-aged man who'd been an important prosecution witness at the trial. He operated the elevator in the Whitestone. His testimony had been that Ross Miller was the only man to go up to the penthouse suite that night, at least within an hour or more of time when Flagg had been killed. Which pretty well stuck Miller with the job.

The lovely went on, "Mr. Weiss came to see me yesterday. He said he'd been forced to lie at the trial, and that my brother was probably innocent. Mr. Weiss wanted to tell me the truth, get the weight off his conscience, he said, but he wouldn't agree to go with me to tell the police his story. He was awfully afraid of going to jail."

"Confessed perjurers usually do go to jail."

She nodded, light glinting on the red hair. "He did promise, though, that he would come back today and give me the whole story in writing, signed by him. I think then he was planning to leave town."

"And he didn't come back," I said.

"That's right. I called his hotel—he's still in the Whitestone—but he wasn't there. And I can't wait long. I've got to at least get his statement today if I can."

I squinted at her. "I can understand why you're anxious, Miss . . . it is Miss?"

She nodded abstractedly.

"But why wouldn't tomorrow do as well?" I was curious to know why she seemed in such a rush. She told me.

"Today's Monday," she said. "On Friday Ross goes into the gas chamber."

"Oh. I see. Weiss admitted perjuring himself, huh?"

"Yes. He said he either had to lie or be killed."

"Who was threatening him. Did he say?"

"Quinn. Frank Quinn."

Involuntarily, I groaned. Frank Quinn was a slug-like, pasty-faced, flabby-bodied hoodlum grown big and powerful in the rackets. I'd bumped into Quinn on several occasions, and he was the only human being who'd ever made me wish I was a Martian. Or else he was the only Martian who'd ever made me glad I was a human.

Doris Miller looked at me. "Do you know the man? His name was mentioned at the trial."

"We've met."

She made a face. "He's . . . a gangster, isn't he?"

Gangster. It sounded so quaint coming from those ripe, red lips. Those lips that looked as if they were always on the verge of puckering. Which is a good verge to be on. I said, "He is one of the behind-the-scenes lads you hear about once in a while. Oh, there's no doubt he shot and slugged his share of victims on his way up, but now he has twenty or thirty hoodlums to do his dirty work. He's a successful failure."

"He sounds dangerous enough."

"He is. Did Weiss say why Quinn forced him to perjure himself?"

"Yes. He told me that Quinn went up to the penthouse a little while before Ross. That would have been right at the time when the murder happened. Mr. Weiss said he felt sure that Quinn had killed the man himself and just made it look as if Ross did it."

"I see. And Quinn told Weiss to keep his mouth shut or he'd wind up dead, too, huh?"

She nodded. "That's about what he said."

One thing had been puzzling me, and I asked Doris, "How come Weiss just got around to spilling what he knew? If he was afraid of Quinn at the time of the trial, why isn't he now?"

"Mr. Weiss had a bad heart attack recently. And he almost died, he said. He told me he'd spent a lot of time since then thinking about what he should do, and decided he'd have to tell the truth. He's still afraid of Quinn, he said; but more afraid of not telling what he knew . . . before Friday."

"Uh-huh. Makes sense. Anything else you can tell me?"

All she personally knew about the murder of Flagg was what had come out at the trial—and what her brother had told her, which was that he was innocent. Ross had told her that he'd received a phone call allegedly from K. C. Flagg asking him to hurry right over. He'd gone to the Whitestone, up in the elevator with Weiss to the penthouse apartment, and walked in to find Flagg dead. And then there were policemen all over him. It was the same story he'd told at the trial, and just simple enough to be true.

"Well," I said, "if Weiss will just do a repeat on that story of his, with witnesses, we've got it made, it would appear."

"You . . . but you haven't even said you'd help me, Mr. Scott."

"I haven't? I didn't? Well, I thought I had. I will, naturally."

She was smiling again. But then she must have thought of her brother breathing cyanide, and her lovely face sobered. We settled my fee, but there was so much promise in her velvety voice, in her lips, and perhaps even ears and elbows, that money hardly seemed worth while any more. She wanted me, specifically, to find Weiss and at least get that signed statement from him, or else get him to talk to the law; and, generally, to do anything else that would help save her brother. I agreed to do everything humanly possible, and perhaps more.

Usually I let clients find their own way out of the office and down to the street. But this one I took to the door, and I watched her walk down the hallway to the elevator. It seemed a shame that I hadn't seen her approaching.

2.

Back in the office I spent a little time brushing up on the facts of the case, the trial and known events leading up to it. Quinn's name had been brought out in the trial. The defense had tried, without any success at all, to show that he might himself have visited Flagg's suite the night of the murder, November 20. It was known that he had been in the Whitestone that night. But Quinn had, he claimed, been discussing "business" with a blonde named Lucy Dale who lived on the second floor of the Whitestone. She had corroborated that story.

I made a few calls trying to locate Chester Weiss, but without success, so I decided to take a look at his hotel, the Whitestone. A desk clerk there with tobacco stains on his stubbled chin told me that Weiss was in room 34. He didn't seem to care if I went up, or down, or set fire to the hotel, so I went on upstairs.

The door was slightly ajar, and I knocked on it, then waited. Nothing happened. After a few seconds I knocked again, harder, and the door swung open silently. "Weiss," I called quietly. "Anybody home?" There wasn't any answer, and I stepped inside.

He was here, but nobody was home. He was lying on his back, fully dressed, on an unmade bed across the room, and I could tell by the way he lay there that he was dead.

I walked to the bed, leaned over and touched his skin, lifted one of his eyelids and looked at the relaxed pupil. He was dead, all right. Without moving his body I looked him over for evidence of what had killed him. There wasn't any blood, no bullet holes or knife wounds. It appeared that he'd died a natural death, but I wouldn't buy that until the coroner had looked him over. Outside and inside. The timing of his demise was far too neat to suit me.

After a quick examination of the room I went downstairs and used a phone to call Homicide. Twenty minutes later the police had finished checking the room, the crime lab boys had done their job and Weiss' body was being carried on a stretcher through the hotel lobby.

I used a lobby phone to call Doris Miller's number. She answered almost immediately. "Yes?"

"This is Shell Scott."

"Oh, have you found out anything yet?"

"Yeah. You won't be seeing Weiss again. He's dead. I think he was helped to get that way, and—"

"Dead!" she interrupted. "Oh, I *knew* it, I just knew something awful would . . . What will happen to Ross now? How can—"

"Hold it. The main reason I called you is this: If Weiss was murdered, the timing of his death right after he went to see you means he was probably tailed to *your* place. In which case, whoever followed the man and knocked him off may think *you* already know too much. So be careful, understand?"

There was silence for several seconds. Then she said, "I'll be careful. But—oh, dear. What is there left to do now?"

Her voice was twisted, as if those blue eyes were about to melt into tears, and I didn't want that lovely crying over anything. "Hey," I said. "You're

a lot better off even now than before Weiss talked to you, aren't you?"

She sniffled. "Yes, that's true."

"So take it easy. I've only been on the case an hour."

"But what can you do? The only man who could have helped me and Ross is dead."

"Not quite. We assume your brother's innocent."

"Of course."

"Then there's still the guy who shot Casey Flagg in the first place. So I think I'll pay a call on Frank Quinn."

I told Doris I'd see her later and we hung up. The more I thought about Frank Quinn, the better he looked as the guy who'd plugged Casey Flagg. And, if I could get any evidence that Quinn had killed Weiss, it would also be an indication that he'd murdered Flagg. But before heading toward Quinn's out-of-town estate, I went up to the second floor here in the Whitestone Hotel, where Lucy Dale still lived in her comfortable suite. During the few minutes I spent talking to her she insisted that Frank Quinn had, for sure, been with her at the time of Flagg's murder—just as she had already said so many times. She told the story easily enough, but she seemed scared. And she didn't convince me.

A few minutes after five P.M. I turned into the one-lane blacktop road that led to Quinn's estate. A mile from the main highway I reached a heavy iron gate closed across the blacktop. Beyond it I could see a big, off-white house rising from an expanse of green lawn like a square mushroom. This was my first visit here, but I'd heard from others about the place. It was thirty rooms on several acres of ground completely enclosed by wire fencing. A couple of armed "hunters" walked the grounds day and night, just in case any rabbits tried to break in, and the gate opening on the driveway that led to the house was controlled electrically from a small shack inside the fence. It was to be assumed that Frank Quinn felt reasonably safe from interruption at home.

The gatehouse was inside the fence, and on my right. As I got out of the Cad, a tall, slope-shouldered guy walked from the small shack to the gate facing me. He was about fifty years old, and lean.

I slammed the car door and the man said, "You're headin' in the wrong direction, podner."

He was wearing black boots chased with an intricate design of white beads, whipcord trousers, and a green-and-gray shirt. A red silk bandanna was around his neck, held together over his Adam's apple by a silver pin. A ten-gallon pearl-colored stetson sat crookedly on his head. He looked a little bit like the end of the world. A double-barreled shotgun hung easily in the crook of his right arm.

For a few seconds, I just blinked at the man, then I walked to the gate and stood facing him. I said, "Tell Quinn that Shell Scott's here to see him."

"He expecting you?"

"He knows me."

"That means he ain't expecting you. You ain't on my list."

"Tell him anyway, Tex."

"Name's Nevada." He shifted the shotgun casually so that it pointed at my middle. What was left of my lunch stopped digesting. "They's a big lop-eared rabbit right behind you, boy," Nevada said. "If'n you don't move right sprightly, I'm apt to nick you when I shoot him."

The remains of my lunch turned into cast iron nuts and bolts, but I said as casually as I could, "You're taking a lot on yourself, aren't you, Nevada? Don't you even ask the boss?"

He looked bleakly at me, deliberated, then stepped into the little house. Plate-glass windows—probably bullet-proof—were set into all four walls of the shack, and I could see Nevada pick up a phone. He spoke into it for almost a minute, then put the phone down next to a small lever on the counter, and pulled on the lever. Immediately the iron gate started sliding aside.

Nevada came out and said, with the shotgun aimed at me again, "Frank says he'll give you a couple minutes. If you got a gun it'd be smart for you to leave it with me."

I hesitated. I carry my .38 Colt Special in a shoulder clip practically all the time except when I'm in the bathtub. But logic and the steady shotgun overcame my misgivings. I reached under my coat and pulled the revolver out, slowly, and with a most peaceful expression on my face.

Nevada told me to lay my gun gently on the grass, which I did, and then he went on, "Boys at the house would just have to take it off your body," he said grinning. "Ain't no way out except this anyhow—except over the fence. And there's a little juice in the fence, boy. You try to go over it, you heat up like Palm Springs in mid-summer." He paused and added, "Play it cozy, and I'll give you back the little gun on your way out."

The drive continued straight in for about a hundred yards, then swung sharply left in front of the house. I parked the Cad a few feet from the entrance, got out and went up four wide steps to the front door. They were expecting me, and a tall wispy ectomorph with thin hips and thinner shoulders opened the door before I'd reached for the buzzer.

"C'mon," he said, then turned and walked ahead of me.

I followed him in, down a thickly carpeted hall on our left and into a monstrous room, like a hotel ballroom. The floor was uncarpeted and slick, as if it were used for dancing. Potted plants made splotches of green all around the huge room. We marched across the slick floor to a wide staircase that led upstairs. At its top was a hall running to our left and right. Directly opposite the head of the

stairs was a big hand-carved door, closed; a few feet to its left was a similar door, ajar. We went to the one on the left, and on into a high-ceilinged room, brightly illuminated by sunlight flowing through big windows on the south side. Red draperies were pulled back from the windows, and the carpet was black. A black desk was against one wall. On a red couch at my left sat Frank Quinn.

The sallow, near-dead look of him against the red upholstery made him resemble a big maggot that had just crawled out of some dry meat. The loose flesh of his jowls dangled alongside his face, his too-red lips drooped, deeply wrinkled skin hung underneath his wide chin. Quinn looked like a man who had tried to keep alive by eating nothing but salt pork and lard, and hadn't been able to do it.

Behind Quinn, half sitting on the back of the divan, was a normal looking guy about my age, thirty. He had no special charm, but alongside Quinn he seemed dashing and almost lovable. His name was Jay, he was one of Quinn's few trusted lieutenants, and the story was told that he'd killed a couple of men and done a short bit at an out-of-state prison.

The guy who'd led me in shut the door and leaned back against it. Quinn said, "O.K., Scott."

There was no charm or affection in his voice. The two of us hadn't run head on into each other before, but I'd tangled with some of his hired muscle, and as a result his staff had become less muscular. Quinn, consequently, disliked me intensely. The only advantage I had at the moment was that he couldn't know for sure how much I knew—or even why I was here. But he had, I knew, a short-fused temper, and if I could light the fuse there was a chance of blowing some interesting information out of his mouth.

So I said, "The Crime Commission sent me out here to discover if you're really Dracula."

His mouth didn't drop open for at least four or five seconds. But then it penetrated and he got his legs under him and started to his feet, swearing every inch of the way. He called me some very ugly names, and right in the middle of one of them I said sharply, "Stow it, friend. Keep that tongue from flapping at me, or bodyguards or no bodyguards I'll tear it out and flap it back at you."

I thought he was going to strangle on his own words. He sputtered, but then caught himself and with a huge effort at self control, calmed himself down, at least on the surface.

"Scott," he said, his voice quivering, "for this I'm going to kill you myself."

"Like K. C. Flagg?"

"I'm clean on Flagg, you stupid jerk. But I'll finish you with pleasure. If that's what you came out here to say, you wasted a trip."

"Relax, Quinn. Can't you take it any more?" He stared at me, and I continued, "What I really came out here to see you about is Chester Weiss."

"I don't know nothing about what happened to Chester—"

He caught himself, but it was too late. He should not, of course, have known that anything *had* happened to Chester Weiss, not unless he'd helped it happen. So his reaction told me what I'd wanted to know—that Weiss' death wasn't accidental; and that Quinn either was responsible for the kill, or knew plenty about it.

And suddenly Quinn was completely calm. Slowly he said, "Scott, I guess you know you're a little too wise for your own good."

"Can't we talk about Chester, Quinn?"

Blandly he asked, "What about Chester? What's he done now?"

"Got himself killed by somebody."

"Well, now. That's too bad. It's always too bad when some nice guy gets himself killed by somebody. You know, Scott, I been thinking of you as a nice guy."

"Sure. Can't we talk about—"

"We can't talk about anything, Scott."

"Well, I'll be seeing you, Quinn. Say hello to all the dope pushers for me."

"You're not going anyplace."

"Knock it off. I just left the police with Chester's body. I told a couple of my friends on the force I was coming out here. If I'm away too long, they'll start wondering why. You don't think I'd come here unless I knew I could get back out, do you?"

Quinn rolled that around in his head. It was the kind of logic that made sense to him. He knew he couldn't keep me here, especially not with bullet holes in my head. He could get away with plenty, but not with killing me right here on his own grounds. Someplace else, maybe, but not in a way that could be tied on him for sure.

He looked at me for what seemed a long time, then he glanced at Jay. He said, "Jay—and you, too, Cline—" he nodded toward the other man still resting with his back against the door "you might as well hear this right in front of Scott. We're going to let him leave, see? But if you ever see his ugly face around here again, shoot it off. You get it? He likes to shoot his face off so well himself, that we're going to help him do it."

Jay laughed heartily, and the ectomorph at the door giggled. I walked toward the door and the man there stepped aside. Nobody laid a hand on me or tried to stop me. I got back into my Cadillac with only one further incident, and that was a minor one. I was walking pretty fast down the hall leading to the front entrance when a door opened and a woman stepped out and almost walked right into me.

There was no harm done, but she looked me over good. Besides my white hair, I've got goofily angled whitish eyebrows and a slightly angled nose, so even a quick look would have probably been enough for her to remember me. But she seemed

to be trying to memorize me, or else place me from somewhere. I recognized her as Mrs. Quinn. She was a well-stacked gal with a coarse, hard-looking face, and about thirty-five years old. After a quick apology for nearly banging into her, I went on out to the Cad and drove to the closed gate.

Nevada, the shotgun still in the crook of his arm, took his time, but finally strolled over and handed me my .38. I stuck it back in the spring shoulder holster as he said, "What'd you do, set fire to Frank's pants?"

"In a manner of speaking, Nevada. Why, was he burning?"

"Called up and jest said to let you go, boy. But he sounded unhappy."

"Too bad. He's brought so much joy into the lives of others."

Nevada snickered, and after a little further conversation turned his back on me and went into his little house. It took him a long time to open the gate, but finally it slid smoothly aside. I drove on through it and back down the blacktop road.

It was getting dark when I reached the two-lane road that led into the Freeway. I was pushing the Cad fast, and keeping my eyes well peeled, though I didn't really expect any trouble for a few hours, anyway. I knew that it was ten to one that Quinn would be giving me a very bad time before much longer, but I didn't figure he'd move as quickly as he did.

I pulled up at the stop sign before the Freeway, and had to wait almost a minute before I could swing into the traffic stream heading back toward downtown L.A. A motorist fifty yards down the Freeway on my left was having trouble. He'd stopped his two-toned blue Chrysler as far to the right as he could get and had his hood up, but the Freeways aren't made for parking or emergency stops and he was in a rather dangerous spot.

Maybe it was that thought—that he was in a dangerous spot. Or maybe it was that the guy peering under the Chrysler hood looked in my direction twice while I was waiting for a good chance to pull into the traffic stream. Whatever it was, it pulled the nerves of my spine from both ends and stretched them a little. The tingle ran up my back and automatically I reached under my coat for the .38.

I squeezed it gently in my hand and glanced at it, rubbed my thumb easily over the knurled hammer and started to slide the gun back into its holster. But then I stopped. There was something wrong. I didn't know what it was for a moment, but I looked at the Colt again. Then it was obvious. The gun was empty. The five cartridges I usually keep in the gun were gone, and all six chambers were empty.

Nevada—he'd had the gun, and now I recalled how casually he'd given it back to me. After being a little too friendly and chatty, he'd turned and walked easily to his little house. Obviously he'd known my gun was empty. He wouldn't have emptied it on his own initiative; that meant Quinn must have phoned him from the house and told him to do it, while I was driving to the gate, then had him stall me, slow me down. And why, I wondered, would Quinn have done that? The answer was easy.

Traffic slackened a bit and I swung right into the Freeway, leaned forward and opened the glove compartment. In a couple seconds I'd grabbed the box of shells I keep in there and had it open on the seat alongside me. At least nobody had ransacked the car. Behind me the Chrysler was just pulling into the center lane, its engine troubles miraculously ended. It stayed a block or more behind me. I loaded the gun while I drove, then continued to steer with one hand while I held the .38 loosely in my lap. Maybe my deductions were out of line, but if trouble came from anybody in the Chrysler, he would expect me to be carrying an empty gun.

And trouble came in a hurry. The two-toned blue job picked up speed fast, got larger in my rearview mirror. As it neared me I could see that there were two men in the front seat. The Chrysler got to within ten yards of me, then swung left to pass. I thumbed back the hammer of my .38. Having the gun already cocked would save only a split second, but I wanted the split second in my favor.

I was moving along about fifty, but the Chrysler must have been hitting eighty, because suddenly it was alongside me. If I hadn't spotted the car before turning into the Freeway, it would all have been over in the next moment. But I was ready, and looking to my left—over the two-inch barrel of my revolver—as the other car came up level with me. The guy on the driver's right, next to me, already had his gun stuck out the window—and it was a submachine gun.

He was swinging it toward my head when I fired. I pulled the trigger three times, and saw two dark spots appear on one side of his face. His head jerked back and the tommy gun started to fall, pressing momentarily against the man's finger around the trigger. A burst of shots cracked out harshly above the traffic noise. Heavy slugs spat from the gun's muzzle and ricocheted whining from the highway, then the gun fell onto the street.

The Chrysler veered toward me and I had to slap my brakes. I got one glimpse of the driver's face as it jerked toward me and quickly away, then the Chrysler zoomed ahead and swung sharply right with its tires screaming. He cut across two lanes and off the Freeway onto Blair Street, narrowly missing a dark sedan that skidded several feet to avoid crashing into him. I might have been able to keep on his tail if I'd been a little quicker, but I wasn't kicking.

I coasted along with the traffic for a little while,

edging over to the right lane. I kept telling myself that I was calm, quite cool and collected, but then I realized that when I had put my .38 away, I had somehow stuck it into the breast pocket of my coat. There is something about the sight of a submachine gun that can play havoc with cool thinking for days. After the Chrysler's driver had gotten off the Freeway, there'd been almost no chance that I could have caught him. But I did stop the first chance I got and put in a call to the police complaint board. The description I gave was an easy one to remember. There was probably only one two-tone blue Chrysler with a dead man in it in all L.A. When that was taken care of I made a more pleasant call, to Doris Miller, and then drove over to see her.

She lived alone in half of a small duplex near MacArthur Park. When I rang, she opened the door, smiled and stepped back, and I almost leaped forward. When she had come into my office earlier this day, the visual impact had been almost enough to spin my eyes smack around so they were looking at my brain, and she had then been dressed in street clothes. Well, what she was wearing now wasn't street clothes. At least not any of the streets in this neck of the woods. They looked more like neck of the woods clothes.

I am not expert at describing women's outer garments—or inner garments, for that matter—but I would say that Doris was crammed into turquoise blue overalls, which were over much less than all, made out of velvet and with a V-neck fashioned with a capital V in mind, and it fit her so snugly everywhere that as far as inner garments go, they appeared to have gone.

"Hello, Shell," she said. "Is there anything left for us to do?"

"I should say there *is,*" I said. "There's *plenty* left for us to do."

She looked at me strangely. "What? I thought you said he was dead."

"He? Who?"

I'll tell you, that was some garment she had on. Everything was all mixed up for several seconds, but then I gathered my dwindling mental powers into a shining point and said, "Oh, him." I took a deep breath, and pulled myself together. "Yeah, he's dead, all right. Weiss, that is."

"But he was our only chance," she said bitterly.

"Our best chance, Doris. Not the only one. There is the salient fact that a couple of Quinn's men just tried to kill me."

"*Kill* you?"

That called for some explanation. When I'd finished bringing Doris up to date, I added, "The fact that he *did* try to have me killed proves his guilt as far as I'm concerned."

"But there isn't any way to prove it to anybody else, is there?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Not yet. The important thing about Weiss' death is this: The only reason for killing him was to keep him from talking—to you, and then maybe to others—about Flagg's murder. And it follows that the only man who would fear what Weiss might say would be the man who really killed Flagg. It figures that he's also the man responsible for trying to kill me. Each time it comes up Frank Quinn. So Weiss told you the truth."

She was quiet for a while. Then she said, "You make it sound simple enough, Shell. But—well, frankly, what good does it do Ross and me? That's not going to get him out of prison."

"True. But there are still four days left in the week."

At that point we dropped discussion of the case. Four days weren't nearly enough for the job of proving Quinn's guilt. Forty days would have been more like it. But I didn't tell that to Doris.

We chatted pleasantly for a few minutes, then she said, "I'm pretty tired, Shell. Think I'll go to bed."

"Oh?"

There must have been in my expression something of what flashed through my mind, because she smiled and added, "So you'd better run along. I feel wretched, really."

"Oh." It had quite a different sound this time, even to my ears.

She walked to the door with me and outside, and as I turned toward her to say good night, she lifted her face and looked up at me, her lips parted, gleaming, and curved slightly upwards at the corners in what might have been the start of a smile. Might have been—but I would never know for sure, because I put my hand behind her, in the small of her back, and pulled her close against me.

She didn't resist, didn't pull away, and I saw her eyes close, lids falling heavily over them as her lips parted even more, and then those lips were on mine. On mine like melting lava, hot and wetly pulsing, curling, trembling. It could have been seconds or minutes later that she pressed her flat hands against my chest and pushed me away from her.

"Goodnight, Shell," she said softly, and then she was gone. The door closed behind her. I turned and walked to my car and got in, and if anybody had been nearby, and desirous of shooting me, that would have been the best possible time for it. I drove toward town with a silly smile on my still-tingling lips, and it was only when I hit the Hollywood Freeway heading for home that I thought about looking behind me.

But I made it to the Spartan Apartment Hotel, where I live in Hollywood, with no trouble. Before turning in I called the Police Building, got put through to Homicide and spent a few minutes in conversation with a couple of the officers there. The coroner had gone over the body of Chester Weiss, and had reported that the deceased had died of a heart attack. There were no unusual marks or cuts on the body, nothing at all out of the ordinary

except a few faint bruises. The coroner's verdict was that Chester Weiss had died a natural death.

It took me quite a while to get to sleep.

3.

For the next two days I spent all my time trying to dig up anything that would help clear Ross Miller. I still felt despite the coroner's report, that Weiss had been murdered, and I spent a lot of time trying to get something, anything, on Frank Quinn, something that would be a lever I might use to pry more out of him. All the time I had to keep looking over my shoulder, making sure that nobody was aiming at the back of my fat head. I got a zero. I came up with a blank, nothing.

I even did some checking on Ross Miller himself, learning only that he seemed more innocent the more I found out about him. He was a law school honor graduate with a twenty-two-year old sister, Doris Miller, which I knew; and a thirty-year-old fiancée Jane French, which I hadn't known. I tried to locate the fiancée, but couldn't, so I spent all my free time with Doris. That amounted to only about twenty minutes a day, but it helped keep me going fast and furious. Doris told me that Jane French had gone back to her home in Kansas City; it hadn't seemed likely that there was going to be a wedding.

It still didn't seem likely. By Wednesday afternoon I had no more than I'd had when I'd left Frank Quinn's fenced-in estate on Monday. I'd picked up a lot of miscellaneous info; but there was nothing that would stop an execution.

I knew that Flagg had been an intermediary, or payoff man—a Bagman—between Quinn and selected city officials who did occasional work that benefited Quinn. I knew that Flagg had needed killing, and I was morally certain that Quinn had pulled the job himself, in person. But it was all conjecture, probability, and logic; there wasn't a shred of usable proof about any of it. And Friday afternoon Ross Miller would start breathing cyanide.

At five-thirty P.M. Thursday I sat at my desk in the office having a meal of sandwiches and milk and using the phone. I had decided that it would take a miracle for me to have a chance of getting Quinn and clearing Ross.

And at five-thirty P.M. I got it.

The phone rang. I grabbed it and said hello, and a woman's voice said, "Is this Shell Scott?"

"Yeah."

"Are you alone?"

"I'm alone—you can talk, if that's what you mean."

"I know you've been looking into the murder of Casey Flagg. And the trial. You'd like to send Frank Quinn to prison for it, wouldn't you?"

I sat up straight in my swivel chair, gripping the phone hard. "I would."

"Then we're partners. Because so would I. Frank did it, all right."

"Who is this?" I remembered the blonde in the Whitestone Hotel. "Lucy?"

"No, this isn't Lucy. This is Mrs. Frank Quinn."

4.

Half an hour later I parked the Cad in a lot on Fifth and started walking toward The Lantern, a bar and grill where I'd enjoyed many bourbon-and-waters and orders of rare prime ribs. I was well known there, and it was a most unlikely spot in which to be shot in the back, which was why I had chosen it.

I didn't see any suspicious characters, or out-of-place loungers as I walked down the alley behind The Lantern. Playing it as safe as I could, I went in through the kitchen, saying a quiet hello to Luigi, the perspiring chef. At the swinging doors leading from kitchen into club I paused and looked over the club's interior, but nothing seemed out of place.

I was early, purposely. Ten minutes after my arrival, Mrs. Quinn came in the front door. She was alone. She spoke to the headwaiter, then went to one of the curtained booths on my left. I waited five minutes, but nobody else came in after her. Then I walked to the booth.

"Hello, Mr. Scott," she said.

"Hello again." I sat down across the table from her and said, "We meet under strange circumstances."

"Never mind the small talk." She was all business. "I suppose you're willing to stick your neck out if you can get enough on my husband to send him to prison."

"My neck's out about as far as it can get now. Your husband's already tried to kill me once."

"I know. I was on an extension and heard him call Davey and Borden before you even left the house Monday. He said for them to blast you on the Freeway, a few miles from the house." She reeled that out casually, as if it were relatively unimportant, then went on, "I got a good look at you, but I thought it was the last time I'd see you alive. Then when Davey came in babbling that Borden was stiff in the car, I decided you were my man."

"That's good. I guess. Your man for what?" The charm had rubbed off this gal long ago, and whatever rubbed it off had just kept on rubbing, but if she could help me get to Quinn, I could do without charm."

"My husband's throwing a party tomorrow night out at our place. Lot of his friends are invited to celebrate."

"What does it have to do with me? I'm no friend of his."

"It's a costume ball. You know, you come as

your favorite history character. Or a dream. Or suppressed desire—anything. You know, Frank likes to do things big—spare no expense and all that."

"Good old Frank."

"Yeah. The pig. Anyway, they'll be wearing masks and all, so you should be able to get into the house with a mask on, huh?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Have to wear a mask, all right." She shook her head. "With that face, maybe you ought to wear two masks."

"Look, this is interesting as can be, but I've a few questions: One, what good will it do me—and you—if I get into the party; two, how do I know I won't be shot in the back of the head if I go within eight miles of your husband's fortress; three, how come you claim that you're willing to finger your own husband—"

"Forget the number-three question. That's my business. I just want Frank sent to college and figure you're the man who can arrange it. A nice life sentence would suit me. The pig. As for the rest of it . . ." She paused, fumbling in a handbag the size of a briefcase, pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

While I was opening the envelope and taking an engraved card out of it, Mrs. Quinn said, "There's a floor safe under the desk in Frank's room—that crumby red and black mausoleum you were in. Nobody in the world knows the combination to the safe but Frank. Not even me. Not even his wife. How do you like that?"

I shrugged. Inside the envelope was an engraved invitation stating that, "You are cordially invited" and so on. The date was tomorrow night at seven P.M., and the address was Frank Quinn's. The invitation didn't look like something that could have been dreamed up and produced on the spur of the moment. "What about the safe?" I asked.

"Well, there's enough stuff in that safe to hang a dozen big stuffed shirts in L.A., see? But more important, I know there's some stuff that would stick Frank good. He keeps it because it helps hold some other guys in line. You get it?" She talked like a man. But, then, she looked like a man.

"I've run across the same kind of situation before."

"Some of the stuff in there isn't no good to Frank, but he's fixed it so all the junk in that safe goes to his executor—you know, when he dies—and it'll ruin some men Frank hates. He hates hard, that man. It would ruin Frank, too, see; but he won't care when he's dead. You get it? Just plain meanness, that's all."

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, what more do you want? All you got to do is go into the safe and drag out all the papers and you got Frank tied up good. With any luck, you'll have enough to save your boy's skin. That Ross character."

She stopped and glared at me as if I'd just started eating soup with my fork. I said, "Yes, ma'am. All I have to do is rip open the safe with my bare hands and get the papers and walk out with sixteen bullet holes and three knives in my back, bite my way through the fence you've got—"

"Oh, knock it. I thought you had a lot of moxie or I wouldn't have come here. I'll see that the safe's open at eight P.M. on the nose. If you can get in, then you should be able to get out under your own power. How you do it, that's up to you. I brought you an invitation—and nobody, but nobody, gets in without an invitation. That's about all I can do. What more do you want?"

I sighed. "That's enough, I guess. But I confess to a little puzzlement. Why you're doing this, for example. And how you plan to have the safe open."

"As for the safe, I'll have a diamond necklace Frank keeps in the safe—he'll give it to me tomorrow sometime, I'll decide I don't want to wear it, just before eight, and he'll naturally put it back in the safe. So, the safe will be open. From there it's up to you—I don't care if you shoot the pig in the—"

She told me where to shoot him, but I merely shuddered invisibly at the thought of such a thing happening to me and asked her again why she was telling me all this. Mrs. Quinn merely repeated that it was none of my business.

"This could be a somewhat involved way," I said, "to get me out there where I could be shot."

"You'll be shot if they lay eyes on you, all right. And I can understand why you're suspicious. But you'll just have to take my word for it. Or forget the whole thing. I can figure out another way to get rid of Frank without killing him. But I thought I'd be doing you a favor—and getting a good man on my side at the same time." She paused, then added, "And to tell you the truth, I could maybe ask a friend of mine to do this job—but he might get shot. I don't really care much if *you* get shot. Frank's already trying to kill you, so what've you got to lose? This way you got a chance to stick him and save your neck—and maybe that Ross guy's—all at the same time. Well, do you want to try it or not?"

"I'll give it a try. But first tell me a couple things."

She looked at her wristwatch. "Make it snappy."

"Maybe you can prove right now whether or not you're on the level with me."

"Try me."

"Did your husband kill Weiss?"

She nodded. "But you'll never be able to prove it. He was afraid Weiss might start babbling, and had him followed. Weiss got out of line somehow, and the boys brought him to the ranch. They wrapped him in blankets and tied a rope around him and made him run along behind a car till he flopped. Then they did it again. Finally he just keeled over and kicked off." She grinned at me. "The toughest part was getting him into his hotel again, but they

managed to sneak him in the back way, while it was still dark."

I smiled back at her and said, "What a lovely group you mingle with."

"He had a bad heart, you know."

"Yeah. That's what he died of. Heart failure. But not K. C. Flagg. He was shot. I've been thinking he was shot by your husband."

"And you're right. Casey Flagg held out a lot of the payoff money, the way I get it—actually, Jay told me most of this. When Frank found out, he stormed up there to the Whitestone and in the middle of the beef he shot him—Frank's got a wild temper."

"So he has."

"Weiss was working for Frank all along. Frank just put a little more pressure on him and made him swear at the trial that Miller was the only one who went up to the penthouse that night."

"How'd Miller happen to be there?"

"Frank called him, naturally. Pretended to be Casey, and the kid ran right over. By then Frank had called the cops. After that argument Ross and Casey had, the kid was a perfect patsy."

That was all she could tell me. It was, of course, enough. Some of her statements, she said, would probably be supported by papers in that floor safe of Quinn's; she wasn't sure. But all she could guarantee was that Quinn would open the safe about eight P.M. Then I could sap him or shoot him or kick him in the seat of his pants, she didn't care. I got the impression that she would prefer for me to shoot him, if possible, between the eyebrows.

She was fidgeting to leave, so we said goodbye and I thanked her for the cordial invitation. She left. But when she left, I was reasonably close behind her.

Mrs. Quinn was easy to tail, and she apparently had no idea that I was following her. She didn't look toward me once. She walked two blocks down Fifth and continued straight ahead, so I turned left and ran the half block to my car, started it and pulled up to the stop sign at Fifth again in time to see her still walking ahead. I swung left and drove slowly toward her until she walked into a parking lot and came out driving a cream-colored Cadillac. The car was easy to follow.

It was dark when she drove into one of the motels on Beverly Boulevard. I watched her park and go into the third unit in from the street, without knocking. Two minutes later I had parked and walked to the motel's entrance. I walked past unit three, on past unit four, turned left between four and five and went to their rear. Then I walked back to number three. I got there about ten seconds before they turned out the lights. There was an inch or two of space beneath a drawn shade, room enough for me to peer through. I peered.

"They" consisted of Mrs. Frank Quinn, and the guy I knew only as Jay. The guy I'd seen in the red-and-black room Monday with Frank Quinn. He was Frank Quinn's right-hand man, no doubt; but he was more than that to Mrs. Frank Quinn. He was more even than both hands.

The ten seconds before the lights went out were enough. It couldn't have been more than four minutes all told since she had walked in the front door. But the way they were acting, even a fool would have guessed that they were old friends.

I went back to the Cad and drove into Hollywood again, feeling rather good. Because it seemed highly probable now that Mrs. Quinn had been on the level with me.

Which meant that I was going to Frank Quinn's party, after all.

5.

The next afternoon at two P.M. I paused outside the Twenty-Centuries Costume Center on La Cienega Boulevard. On display behind the window was the stately figurine of a gal in powdered wig and fluffy silks and laces, looking much like Marie Antoinette, and with her dress scooped out even lower than today's most daring gowns. Worn any lower, it would have been merely a high skirt. I liked it a lot. Next to Marie was a guy from a different period, a Roman gladiator, who didn't look glad about anything; he was tugging strenuously at a broad-bladed sword sticking from his solar plexus, and looking pretty uncomfortable. It was an interesting window, but of no great help to me, so I went on inside.

The inside was even more interesting than the outside, primarily because the little honey-blonde lovely behind the counter was no wax model, but definitely a model I could wax enthusiastic about, and she was wearing a harem costume that would have cremated the sultan.

I walked up to the counter and leaned over it toward her, and she batted big long dark lashes at me like a gal waving two fans in a Spanish fandango and said, "Can I help you?" and I said, "You have."

She cooed and chuckled and made jolly noises all at once, which turned out to be quite delightful even though you may not think that possible, and I said, "I note that you are already modeling, in superlative fashion, one of this establishment's costumes. That being the case—"

She interrupted, grinning just as widely as I was, "The Marie Antoinette costume sells for six hundred and twenty dollars, and I don't model *that* one."

"Well, at least I knew it was Marie Antoinette. I'm not so stupid."

"Did you want the costume?"

"No, I'm after something for me." She coughed

delicately and fluttered the fanlike eyelashes over soft brown eyes, and I added hastily, "For me to wear, I mean. I'm invited to a costume ball."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Something that will cover me all up."

"That seems a shame."

"Doesn't it? I want to . . . surprise some people."

"Oh, you don't want to be recognized. A surprise?"

"That's it."

She thought a moment. And very cute, she was, thinking. It was as if she had to stretch unused muscles, creakingly, but then her soft little face smoothed out and she said, "I have it!"

"You do, indeed."

"The clown!"

"What?"

"The clown! There!" She pointed, all excited. Here was a gal who really threw herself into her work. "Isn't he dreamy?"

I followed her pointing finger. All I saw was a stiff model wearing a black floor-length gown or robe and a black hood with eye and mouth holes cut in it, and holding a broad-bladed axe.

"Not the Executioner, silly," she said. "The Clown."

Then I spotted him, another ten feet farther away. It was another figurine, male this time, presumably, dressed in a baggy white outfit which droopily covered his whole body, even including the legs in somewhat the same fashion as this little gal's harem bloomers, and which had three six-inch red buttons down the front. On his head was a tasseled red-and-blue cap, and his face was painted white and red and black with a big blue nose stuck on for good measure. He was somewhat nightmarish, if not exactly dreamy, and he was exactly what I wanted.

"That's for me," I said.

"Purchase or rental?"

"Rent. I'll just need it tonight . . ." I paused, thinking. "But I'll leave a deposit to cover the complete cost."

"Oh, that won't be necessary—"

"It might. It just might."

She went off into what was apparently the stockroom and came back with a cardboard box. While she wrote out my receipt we talked about extra items I might need, and I wound up with a kit of theatrical makeup. And that appeared to do it. All I needed now was a dozen Marines, a tank, and a flame-thrower.

The little gal handed me my receipt and I began writing a check for the required rental plus deposit, then she said, looking past me, "I'll be with you in a minute, sir."

I looked over my shoulder. A big ape about my size was eyeballing us strenuously. Or maybe he was just looking at the little gal, which seemed likely since a lot of the little gal was showing here and there among the filmy bits of her costume. But when I looked around he mumbled, "No hurry, no hurry," and turned aside. I'd seen all of him I wanted to see, anyway; he had a face like a barracuda, a face that seemed to come to a point in front, studded with too many teeth.

"There you are, sir."

I pulled my head around again. The little tomato was holding my package toward me, smiling over it the way gals smile over champagne glasses just before they say, "Oo, it tickles."

"Don't call me sir, please. Call me Shell."

"Shell?"

"Uh-huh. In case I call up sometime and say 'This is Shell' and then make all sorts of shameless remarks."

"Oh, that sounds like fun."

"Who knows? We might even have our own little costume party."

"And you a man who goes for Marie Antoinette. I can imagine the costumes." She raised her shoulders, tilted her head to one side and stirred up the air with those eyelashes again. Then she said, " 'Bye, Shell," and turned her back on me, and walked straight ahead to the stockroom again.

It was about twenty feet to the stockroom's door, and I watched her every inch of the way. Not only the forward inches, but the from-side-to-side inches. She had a walk that was one of the friendliest things I'd ever seen. Her well-rounded hips swung provocatively back and forth as if they were waving goodbye, and as they went out of sight I murmured under my breath, "Not goodbye, my dears . . . but only *au revoir.*"

Perhaps I was being untrue, in my fashion to Doris Miller, but how many days in the week do you meet a harem girl? And that thought reminded me that I was supposed to drop by any minute now and see Doris. Carrying my clown outfit, I headed for the Cad. I didn't see the Barracuda again. And so soon after that walk to the stockroom, it was understandable that I didn't even think about him again, not then.

6.

Doris had on another of her getups, or maybe it was a getout, because she did appear to be trying to get out of it. This was my day of days, but I was already occupied for the night. Life is sometimes cruel.

My client smiled half-heartedly at me, but even without all the verve and bounce in the world she was one of the most delectable creatures I'd seen. Seen this year at least. I could imagine how bright and shining and beautiful she would be with her brother safe again and out of the clink. You could hardly blame the gal for having a slightly distant

and strained appearance under the circumstances. Ross Miller's execution was, after all, only about twenty-four hours away.

When we were seated inside the living room of her apartment, Doris asked anxiously, "Is there any hope left at all, Shell?"

"There is. Don't get me wrong—that's all there is: a chance. Frank Quinn is tossing a party tonight to celebrate . . . that is, he's throwing a costume ball. All wrapped up as a clown, and with my face smeared with paint, I can manage to get inside the place. Then, with luck, I can get into Quinn's safe. And with some *more* luck, there'll be info in the safe that can hang Quinn and spring your brother."

The furrows between her oddly disturbing blue eyes smoothed out a little, but didn't go away. My tidings hadn't raised her spirits to any giddy level. Dully she said, "I see. Well, maybe it will work out all right."

The more I thought about tonight's ball, and my planned part in it, the less likely it seemed that there would be any positive development except my getting shot in the head, or even somewhere fatal. But I told Doris, in a confident tone, "Honey, the setup may not sound like the most perfect we could ask for—but isn't it better than just sitting around waiting for . . . the news broadcast, say? And there really is good reason to believe that if I can get into Quinn's safe, there'll be everything in it but marshmallows."

"But will it do *Ross* any good?"

I was getting just a little tired of this. Doris was, there is no doubt, gorgeous; but sometimes even that is not enough. I was only mildly enthusiastic about setting out tonight to get myself killed, and her rather negative attitude was not increasing my joyous anticipation of that event.

I said, "Baby, not having Superman's X-ray vision, I do not know. If I didn't think there was a fair chance this would save his neck, I wouldn't be going into that den of axe murderers." I was going to go on, but decided I was being more than a little unfair; Doris must be finding it diffiult to hold any thought in her mind except the thought of that lethal gas chamber at San Quentin.

Then, suddenly, she smiled. It was a wan smile, but at least a nice try. She had been sitting in a chair near the couch I was in, but now she got up, walked over and sat down alongside me. She took my hand and held it in hers as she said, "I'm sorry. Really. I'm just so . . . up in the air. Believe me, Shell, I appreciate what you're doing so very much."

"Oh . . . it's nothing . . ." My hand was tingling already.

"But it *is*. You, why you might even get killed. Those—those horrid men might kill you—"

"No, no. Not me, my sweet. Why, I'm virtually indestructible."

She squeezed my hand in both of hers, leaning closer to me. I could feel the warmth of her thigh against my knee as she turned slightly. "You're so brave, Shell. It really is a brave thing for you to do, going in there . . . I don't know what I'd have done if we hadn't met."

I was just beginning to wonder how I could ever have been even a little bit piqued with Doris, but her face was only about six inches from mine, and she had stopped talking, and I stopped wondering about anything and leaned a little forward myself. This was no time for wondering; this was a time for action. She met me half way. Her lips were parted and moist, and so charged with heat and life that kissing her was almost like puckering in a light socket.

It seemed as if approximately two hundred and twenty volts zigzagged from my lips down to my heels and back, wreaking havoc in both directions, and when Doris pulled her lips from mine it would not have surprised me greatly if the house had been on fire.

"Oh . . . you'd better go, Shell."

"What?"

She said it again. This was the big difference between us. One kiss and I was ready, and she was ready for me to go. I put up a pretty good argument, but she was adamant, which is Harvard for "No."

As I left, she said, "I'll be different, Shell, if you're . . . successful tonight. But right now I'm, well, I just can't let go. You understand."

"Sure. And just as soon as I can, I'll let you know, Doris. One way or another."

She nodded, and I left. There was, I thought, a third way she could find out what might happen tonight; that would be for somebody else to bring her the news.

At six-thirty P.M. I drove into the Gerry Agency on Figueroa and rented a car, a new Lincoln. I left my Cad at the agency, transferred a couple packages to the Lincoln and drove toward Frank Quinn's. However, I didn't go straight there. On a little-traveled road I stopped, opened my packages and looked at my clown suit, and the makeup kit. Then I started on my face. Fifteen minutes later I looked even worse than usual. My face was smeared with white paint, exaggerated red lips curved in a perpetual smile, and a bulbous blue nose sat in the center of all that. My normally white eyebrows were also blue, and the tasseled clown cap covered my short white hair. At least nobody could recognize me.

I climbed into the white clown suit with its three six-inch red buttons down the front. My .38 Colt Special was in its holster at my left armpit, and beneath the regular clothes I wore under my costume. In one of my pockets was a leather-covered sap. I was ready to go.

Then, with my engraved invitation on the seat beside me, I drove slowly toward Frank Quinn's home. For just a moment I let myself wonder if

Mrs. Quinn had perhaps been pulling my leg, despite her carryings-on with Jay, but then I pushed that thought out of my mind for the night. If she had been, it was too late for me to start checking up on her now. At least I'd told some of my chums in Homicide that, if the coroner dug any bullets out of my body, they belonged to Frank Quinn, no matter from what gun they came.

I pulled up before the closed gate barring the way to Quinn's house at a little after seven-thirty sharp. One of Quinn's hired hands strolled over to my Lincoln and said, "Yeah?"

I handed him the invitation. He looked it over glanced at me, nodded, then handed the card back and yelled, "Okay, Nevada."

The gate slid aside and I drove in. And I had crashed Frank Quinn's exclusive hoodlum ball. As simple as that. In the rearview mirror I caught a glimpse of the metal gate closing behind me. The sight sent a small ripple, like a faint cool breeze, over my skin. It's usually not a good idea to look back. I pulled my eyes from the rearview mirror, looked ahead down the drive, and went on up it to park in front of the big two-story house.

About a dozen cars were already here ahead of me. As I got out of the Lincoln and walked toward the front door, I could hear sounds of the festivities under way inside. Music mixed with occasional shouts and laughter. Or maybe it was shots and laughter; this was a pretty rough party. Ah, well. I squared my shoulders and walked up the steps to the front door, and rang the bell.

The last time I'd been here, a thin-hipped, narrow-chested ectomorph had let me in. The same guy opened the door this time. He was dressed as a court jester and had, in addition, a black mask over his eyes and nose; but I recognized the shape. He checked my invitation, then handed it back to me, nodding silently.

Then he led me down the hall to our left. At its end, two doors were opened into the room that had looked to me like a hotel ballroom. There was a lot of movement and color visible as I stepped into the room then it resolved itself into the shapes of men and women dancing, to music from a small combo at the rear of the room, drinking, standing in small groups, all of them costumed. Probably forty people were already present. About half wore masks over their faces, or at least over the eyes, but among those with bare chops I saw some features I recognized.

As I left the doorway and walked toward a long portable bar I'd spotted in one corner, I brushed past bullet-headed Jim Lester, three times arrested on murder charges, twice acquitted, and now out on the streets after serving nearly two years of the manslaughter rap. He had, however, murdered the three people. Also recognizable were two safe men, a well-known fence, and a thin guy named Finney who was, I knew, wanted by the L.A. police right now on a burglary charge.

No telling what there was under all the masks and paint and putty. But it was a reasonable assuption that the answers to at least a couple dozen unsolved crimes were in the room. The guy behind the bar was efficient, and quickly mixed me a bourbon and water that was mostly bourbon. I leaned on the bar and sized up the situation.

The band played loudly on my right. Beyond it, against the far wall, was the wide stairway I'd gone up on my previous visit here. Up there was Quinn's room and Quinn's safe, where I would have to be in—I looked at my watch—ten minutes. As I glanced up again, I got a shock that alerted every neuron in my nervous system. I raised my eyes to see the white, puffy face of Frank Quinn. It looked as if he were staring straight at me.

The sickly-looking flesh seemed to hang even more laxly from his facial bones, the lips seemed redder, the eyes smaller. It seemed a caricature of a face, a mask, rather than the features of the man himself. And for a moment, while he seemed to stare at me, I felt exposed, unmasked myself.

But then he chuckled mildly, and pointed at someone or something beyond me. So he hadn't been looking at me.

Anyhow, I told myself, for a second or two there I had forgotten I was well hidden under blue nose and eyebrows, white and red greasepaint, and my three-button outfit. Nobody could know that Shell Scott was here, disguised as a clown. Even if Quinn had somehow suspected I might try to bust in here, he couldn't know I'd dressed as a fugitive from a circus. That thought reassured me, started me breathing normally again. But I had a big slug of bourbon just the same. And I decided that even though I was well disguised, I'd be careful to keep out of Quinn's sight if I could.

Quinn was dressed in lush-looking robes, and on a guess I'd have said he was Henry the One-Eighth or something close to it. He turned away and spoke to a plump woman next to him. I let my eyes roam over the room. In another minute I'd spotted Mrs. Frank Quinn. She was dressed in an ankle-length white gown and long white gloves, and some kind of white plumes were sprouting from her hair like mutant dandruff. Around her neck she wore a thick, glittering, heavy necklace made, according to the story she'd given me, of diamonds. I could understand why her husband would want to keep that item locked in his safe whenever it wasn't being worn. Especially among a group of light-fingered citizens such as these.

But the sight of those rocks was corroboration of Mrs. Quinn's story. That knowledge—plus the fact that I was still in one piece—gave me a lift like elevator boots, and suddenly I was relaxed, at ease. I felt good, and a kind of exaggerated feeling of confidence flowed through my veins. It suddenly occurred to me that I was almost casually toying

with a bourbon and water in the midst of twenty or thirty of the most vicious and dangerous criminals in Los Angeles, at least half of whom would take great pleasure in shooting me on sight.

It was the kind of bouyant, invincible feeling that can make a guy get reckless, so I clamped down on it, kept it simmering lightly but under control. I knew it was caused mainly by the excess of hormones and fluids and juices poured into my blood because of the tension and excitement, the nearness of danger. But I figured that this was the best time I could choose for my trip upstairs. It was a trip I had to make pretty quick, anyway, and there could be no better time for it than now, while I was feeling as if I could raise the house with one hand.

So I gulped the last of my drink, put the glass back on the bartop and headed across the dance floor toward the stairs. When I reached them, I turned and looked at the crowd again. Either it was coincidence, or Mrs. Quinn had an idea that the blue-nosed clown was Shell Scott, but she had suddenly walked over to her husband. She stood on the far side of him from me, so that his back was toward me, and I saw her reach toward the necklace around her throat.

So the double-cross was starting. The blood pumped a little harder in my arteries, and I turned, went up the wide stairs. I didn't look around until I'd reached the top, but I couldn't control the tightening of muscles between my shoulder blades and at the back of my neck. At the top of the stairs I glanced quickly below, but nobody seemed to be paying any attention to me. Mrs. Quinn was just handing the necklace to her husband. I turned and walked rapidly ahead toward Quinn's office.

The door was unlocked. I opened it and stepped into the red-and-black room, closed the door behind me and leaned back against it. Something was wrong, out of place, and for seconds I couldn't figure out what it was. Then I realized that the lights were on in the room. That seemed odd, since it didn't seem likely that Quinn would be using this room during his party.

And then I saw the clown.

For a crazy moment I thought it was a reflection of myself. But this clown had a red nose, and blue buttons down the front of his costume, just the opposite of mine. And he was lying flat on his back next to the wall. And there was a small hole at the side of his forehead, a hole through which a little redness, and a little pink and grayish ugliness, and all his life had spilled.

The sight was such a shock that my mind stopped functioning for seconds. It wasn't just the idea of walking in on a dead man; I'd seen enough stiffs to populate a small cemetery. It was mainly, I think, that the corpse looked so much like me. Except for the hole in his head, and the fact that he was so dead.

I stared at him, walked to him and bent over to put my hand on his face. It was white-smeared with grease paint or cosmetics, but he was still warm. He felt much more normal than he looked. His lips were slack, the mouth open, but the red-painted lips still curved in a ludicrous smile. The little hole in his forehead looked as if it had been made by a small slug, probably a .32.

I stepped back from the corpse, mental faculties starting to function again, but slowly at first. I reached under my costume and got the Colt from beneath my coat, stepped across the room to the wall alongside the door. Mrs. Quinn had just been giving her husband the necklace, I recalled; he should be on his way up those stairs by now. And if he stepped in here and saw that dead man, I'd never get that safe open. I couldn't move the stiff very far. There was a closed door in the right-hand wall. That would be the room directly opposite the head of the stairs, but I didn't know what was in there.

All I needed was one guy to spot me lugging a corpse around, or doing something else more than a little out of the ordinary, and let out a yell or a shot, and in about three seconds there'd be no way for me to go except up. Or, I thought dismally, down; about six feet down. This disguise of mine was good only as long as nobody started wondering about it.

I looked at the gun in my hand. I might get away with firing it, considering all the noise and music below. But the bang of a .38 would probably bring half a dozen wondering characters up here in a hurry. I kept a grip on my gun, but reached under my outfit again and dug out the leather sap I'd brought along, held it in my left hand, the Colt in my right. Sweat had automatically started popping out on me; my face was damp and there was wetness underneath my arms.

And who had killed the clown? Why? Who was he? About a dozen questions started racing around in my brain. I looked at the dead man again; despite the fact that I had a blue nose and his was red, that the big buttons on my outfit were red and his were blue, we looked almost alike. One clown looks pretty much like another—especially at a party where liquor is flowing freely. So it seemed fairly obvious that there was only one logical answer for the fact that a dead clown was in this room—his killer must have thought he was killing me.

It was the most likely answer, and I had a strong feeling it was the right one, but I couldn't begin to figure how anybody knew I was dressed as a clown. The only thing I could think of was that Mrs. Quinn had doublecrossed me somehow—but she hadn't known what I was going to wear either.

Then that closed door in the wall opened and I got my answer. I also came close to getting a .32 slug in the teeth.

It wasn't the hall door by which I was standing, but the one across the room and I'll have to admit

that if we both had entered at the same time I probably wouldn't have come out of the shock first; but I'd had time to get over my initial jarring and start functioning mentally again. So even though I still got jarred up a bit, it was nothing to the shock I gave the guy who opened that door and stepped into the room.

The man was dressed in a coal-black robe that reached almost to the floor and covered his body completely, but his face was bare, and it was the man I'd seen at the Twenty-Centuries Costume Center yesterday, the Barracuda. That suddenly explained a lot of things. He had either tailed me to the costume shop or he'd been picking up an outfit himself. Probably the latter, since I remembered seeing the black robe and hood there. But either way he would have reported to Frank Quinn that a big goon with white hair and fractured white eyebrows had rented a clown outfit. The explanation for more funny business was tottering on the edge of my brain, but I didn't have time to grab it right then.

The Barracuda was standing in the open doorway staring at me with his eyes getting so wide he did indeed look much like a six-foot fish, and with the breath being exhaled from his open mouth with the sound of a tire going flat. He was plainly paralyzed momentarily, but just as I started to jump for him he actually took a faltering step toward me, one hand coming up to point at me as he croaked, "But . . . but . . ."

He knew very well that he'd just shot me, and he appeared so transfixed to see me on my feet—and, by now, jumping toward him—that it seemed likely I could have turned cartwheels across the room to the man. But just as I reached him and started swinging the sap up at his jaw, he recovered enough to duck.

Maybe it was because I was swinging the sap with my left hand, but whatever the reason, I was awkward enough to miss him. The force of the blow pulled me off balance, but I jerked my head to the left and saw him thrust his right hand under the robe, to slap it against the little .32 he pulled out in front of him.

The funny thing was that I wasn't really worried about getting shot, but about how much noise that little gun might make. And about the fact that Frank Quinn must be practically outside the door by now. But I had caught my balance, and the time that Barracuda had spent in reaching for his gun and pulling it out was enough for me. He'd barely got the gun clear of his robe when I whipped my left hand back toward him, the sap swishing audibly through the air and smacking hard against his gun hand.

The gun fell noiselessly at our feet, but sudden pain forced a yell from his throat. I was still swinging back, following the momentum started by my left hand and arm, and as I came around in a half circle I dropped my .38 and just let my right hand fold up into a hard fist as it kept on swinging. All I had to do was guide it a little, and my knuckles bounced off his mouth while he was still yelling.

I felt his teeth snap. His head flew back and he went down on his fanny, then sprawled out limply, his bloody mouth almost touching the feet of the man he had undoubtedly just killed. I jumped to the open doorway he'd come through, looked into the room beyond it. Nobody was in there; it was a bedroom adjoining the office. The bed was made, but rumpled. I didn't waste any time looking the place over closely; the main thing I wanted was to get the two limp bodies out of that office before Quinn came in.

I grabbed the stiff's legs and hauled him past the door, into the bedroom, then grabbed Barracuda's feet and roughly repeated the operation. As I started to close the door into the office I saw that the black hood that went with the executioner outfit was still in there on the office carpet. I could see the two eyeholes in it. I was just going to grab it when I heard footsteps outside in the hall.

I didn't even have time to close the adjoining door completely. I froze, the door still open about four inches. Without moving my position, I could see Frank Quinn as he came into the office. Suddenly I remembered that my gun was still in there, too. My gun, and Barracuda's.

If Quinn had seen any of those items there would probably have been a lot of noise all of a sudden. But he walked across the room toward his desk—and out of my sight. Light flashed and gleamed from the diamond necklace he carried carelessly in one hand. I made myself count slowly to ten before moving, then I eased over close to the wall, pushed gently on the door to open it far enough so I could stick my head through it. The sap was still in my left hand; I switched it to my right.

I heard grunting noises from the region of the desk and saw that Quinn was kneeling on the floor, his left side toward me. The safe was beneath that desk, I remembered, in the floor. I was starting to get wound up with tension; it was gnawing at my stomach, biting into my neck. It was high time, and past time, that I got out of here, and I could feel the urgency growing in me to get going.

Quinn seemed to move with annoying slowness. He grunted again, mumbled something under his breath. Then he reached forward, tugged at the door of the safe and pulled it up and over—and in that moment I stepped into the room and moved toward him.

He glanced up when I was two steps away from him, and his face got blank, then his mouth opened wide, but my right hand was already over my head, and descending. The sap smacked him hard, squarely in the middle of his forehead, and he simply hung in the air for a moment, then sagged to the carpet.

I grabbed my .38 off the floor, then rolled his bulk aside, leaned over the safe. It was about a foot and a half square, and I could see money, papers, a couple portfolios down inside it. I pawed at it, hauled the whole bunch out and threw aside the stuff that was obviously useless to me, like the jewelry and money. There was too much of the material to carry under my outfit, so I had to check it right then and there for the most important items.

In the first ten seconds I found one beauty. It was a letter from a man named John Porter, a minor city official with a spotless reputation. The whole letter was interesting, but especially in connection with one paragraph which said, "After all, we agreed on 500 so in the last six months you've saved 1200 by sticking me. Maybe times are tough, but I got to pay my income tax too—that's a joke."

The tone of the letter seemed more plaintive than angry, but I had a hunch that it had made Quinn more angry than anything else. His wife had told me in The Lantern that K. C. Flagg had been stuffing into his own pockets chunks of Quinn's payoffs to "The Boys" in town. The letter in my hand indicated that one of the short-changed Boys had written a not too prudent letter to Quinn—and it could well have been the first knowledge Quinn got that he was being cheated by his bagman, K. C. Flagg. In this case, cheated out of $200 a month. Knowing what I did of Quinn, it seemed likely that he would immediately have stormed over to see Flagg, for a showdown. And that could have led to a killing, considering Quinn's sudden temper. Which was exactly what his wife had told me had happened.

So that line of reasoning made the date on the letter especially interesting. It was dated the 19th of November. Which meant it would have been delivered to Quinn on the 20th. And K. C. Flagg had been shot to death on the 20th of November.

I looked quickly through some of the other papers. There were a couple of the small tapes used for dictaphones, and I put them in my pile of stuff-to-take, just on general principles, along with a spool of regular recording tape. Several of the letters and papers looked extremely interesting, and damaging to various and sundry characters, but I wasn't interested in those items at the moment. Then my eye fell on the name "Ross" as I started to toss a letter aside.

I grabbed it again, started reading. This one was dated only about two months back, and among other things it said, "You know I wouldn't never mention it to nobody, Frank, but I do know the *whole story* about Ross M, and that's a pretty big mental strain. And I really do need more cash what with all these financial reverses."

There was more, but that was the salient part. The letter was signed Chet. There was a chance that Ross M was somebody other than Ross Miller, and that Chet was not Chester Weiss—about one chance in a million. Maybe Quinn had originally threatened Weiss, but it looked as if Weiss had since then developed a bad case of blackmail fever.

Maybe I didn't have enough yet, but I had plenty to satisfy others besides myself of Quinn's guilt—especially with what Mrs. Quinn could say, if she would. I grabbed a handful of miscellaneous papers, added my two letters to the stack and stuffed the crumpled wad into one of my coat pockets, under the clown suit. The one large and two small tapes I wrapped in more of Quinn's documents, and jammed that into the other coat pocket. Then I put my .38 back in its holster, and got to my feet.

My eye fell on the phone on top of Quinn's black desk. I grabbed it, reached for the dial so I could put in a fast call to the police and get a dozen radio cars on their way out here. Right now was the time when I wanted lots of policemen around me—and there was sufficient, and legitimate, reason for calling them. The papers I had in my pockets—and a dead man in a clown suit.

But there wasn't any dial on the phone. I had the receiver at my ear and heard Nevada's twangy voice saying, "Yeah? Yeah? Frank?"

I almost slammed the phone back on the hook but I stopped in time. That might be just enough to cause Nevada to send some of the hired hands up here checking. Instead, I said in a thick slurred voice, "Hiya, pal. Gimme Oakridge 2-2348. Somebody heisted my dial."

"You better get the hell out of there," Nevada said. "You ain't supposed to be in there. Frank around?"

"He's out. Gimme Oakridge 2-2348. Wanna talk to Mabel."

Nevada told me to go get another drink instead, and I let him talk me out of phoning Mabel. I hung up, sweating, and went to the door. For a moment I paused there, then with a last look at the havoc I was leaving behind me, I went out into the hall.

As I closed the door, I thought I heard something thump, either inside the room or nearby here in the hall. But a costumed man and woman were just coming up the stairs and looking toward me, so I stretched my painted grin even wider and walked toward them.

Music floated up from the band below. The costumed couple grinned back at me and waved and pointed and did everything except dance a jig. They were drunk enough for eight people. I did a little dance step myself as I passed them, and the guy roared with happiness and fell flat on the floor.

I started down the stairs. Everything looked about the same as it had when I'd come up. There was a lot of color down there, people dancing, spinning about, guests in bright outfits standing in groups and talking. For that moment I thought I'd make it. I had lost most of the buoyant, practically invincible feeling I'd had a few minutes earlier, but

there was still some of it left, and I actually felt that I was going to be able to simply stroll out of the house and away.

I got almost to the bottom of the staircase.

There were only a few steps to go, and I was eyeing a group of four men nearby, just off the edge of the dance floor. One of them was the bullet-headed killer, Jim Lester, and the three others looked like hired gunmen, too. The thought had just entered my mind that it was going to be a nice feeling to get about ten miles away from such as these, when there was an unintelligible shout from the head of the stairs behind me.

The four men jerked their heads around to look past me, at the floor above. I could see almost every head in the place swing toward whoever had yelled. I knew who it was before I looked, but I looked anyway. He was leaning weakly against the bannister at the head of the stairway. He didn't have a gun, but one hand was raised so he could point a finger at me. It was Barracuda. His mouth was red and puffed, and some of the blood had dripped down onto the long black gown-like outfit that covered his clothing completely.

One of the four men near me said, "It's Hacker. Look at his mouth. What the—"

"Stop him!" Barracuda—or Hacker—yelled, his voice hoarse, twisted as it pushed through his puffed lips. "Stop him, kill him!" He pointed that accusing finger straight at me.

7.

When I looked at the gathering again, almost all of the heads were turned toward me. Forty or fifty pairs of eyes stared at me. The band stopped playing suddenly. I knew it was a forlorn, a dismal hope, but I tried to stretch my painted grin wider again and hop clownlike down the last few steps, but the cause was long lost. And I knew it. I knew I wasn't going to make it.

In the silence Barracuda yelled again, harshly, "Kill that clown! It's Shell Scott!"

A lot of the heads jerked again. Plenty of the people here—*all* of the local hoodlums—knew my name, my reputation, and that they would either like to shoot, or kick, my teeth in. I didn't hesitate. Even before the words stopped bouncing off the walls, I had spun around and was sprinting up the stairs toward Barracuda.

Somebody behind me was almost as fast. A shot cracked out and a bullet plucked at my clothing like Death's fingers. But then I was almost up to Barracuda, and any more shots might have hit him instead of me. With that thought in mind I ducked under Barracuda's reaching hands, wrapped my left arm around his waist and yanked him toward me as I drove my right hand into his gut. I kept my hand open, fingers jabbing stiffly, and in the right place the blow would have killed him. But it bent him forward, air expolding from his lungs, and I grabbed him, wrestled him up onto my shoulder.

In the exertion, I felt my tasseled clown cap pulled off. It fell, a bright spot of color, to the steps. I knew that my blasted white hair, now that it was uncovered, was probably just as bright as the cap—and behind me I heard a couple of yells from men who thought they recognized me. One of them shouted, "It's Scott, all right! I'd know that—"

But I missed the rest of it. At least there weren't any more shots; Barracuda over my shoulder was a temporary shield. If we had been standing still, my colorful clown costume against his somber black would have made an easy target—but I was *moving*.

I ran with him, hardly noticing his weight, toward the room where Quinn and the dead man lay. Heavy feet pounded up the stairway behind me. The door to Quinn's office stood slightly ajar. I bent forward, and hit the door, let Barracuda fly off my shoulder and crash heavily against the floor inside the red-and-black room while I grabbed under my coat for the .38.

With the familiar butt of the Colt in my fist I swung around, raising the gun. Two men were at the head of the stairs. Bullet-headed Jim Lester was a step in the lead, a big .45 automatic in his hand, and even as I spotted him he blasted one shot at me.

But just one.

I knew that I'd be dead in less than ten seconds if I didn't stop those bums who were running up here at me like hounds after a rabbit, and because it was Jim Lester, and because he was shooting at me besides, I didn't even have to think about what I was going to do. I was already aiming at his chest when his gun blasted at me, and I squeezed the trigger gently, thumbing back the hammer and getting off a second shot moments after the first one.

Both of them hit Lester, the first one stopping him, and the second spinning him a little to one side. He staggered and the man alongside him let out a yell, turned and jumped about six steps down the stairs. That wasn't enough for me. I knew the others would be coming up again too soon if I didn't scare hell out of them and slow them down. I had a clear shot at the man's legs, but he was moving fast and it was plain luck that I hit him. If I hit him. His right leg crumpled, though, just as my gun cracked, and he rolled end over end to the foot of the stairs.

Jim Lester was still turning around, easily, almost gently. The gun dangled from his fingers, then dropped. He stepped forward, got his foot on the first step as if he were going to walk down them. But that was the best he could do. It was queer the way he fell. His arms dropped first, hands dangling at his sides. Then he toppled forward like a tree falling. He landed heavily, and stuck there, feet on the second or third step down, his face pressed against a step lower down. He didn't roll any

farther, just lay there. He didn't move.

That would hold them a while. But it didn't much matter. It wasn't going to be any help to me. I'd had it. I'd really had it, and I felt cold all over. Mentally I cursed myself for an idiot, a brainless slob, for coming here in the first place. There wasn't a chance I could get out. Twenty or thirty bloodthirsty gunmen all dying to kill me, and an electrified fence around the place—I swore. It was that blasted woman that got me into this. That Doris Miller. It's *always* a woman, I thought miserably.

But then for a moment I could see that gorgeous face before me, that sensational body, and it actually soothed my jangled nerves a bit. At least the vision changed the direction of my thoughts a little, and for a second or two I stopped thinking of getting killed and began thinking of how to stay alive. That was enough. All of a sudden it hit me. Maybe there was a way out of here. Maybe I could stay alive after all. Ah, women are good for me. No doubt about it.

I jumped inside Quinn's office and started yanking off my clown costume, ripped it in my hurry. Then I looked out the door again. Down below, at the foot of the stairs, the man I'd shot in the leg was pulling himself over the floor like a crippled crab. Only a couple other men were in sight, the rest of them were where I couldn't see them, or shoot them. That was fine with me.

I aimed close to one of the two men visible, and fired. All of a sudden nobody except the injured man was in sight, and then he was among the missing, too. I left the doorway, jumped back into the room. Barracuda was just starting to stir, and I didn't have time to do the thing nicely. I kicked him in the head. His gun was still on the floor, against the wall. There were only two bullets left in my revolver, so I stuck the .38 back in its holster and shoved Barracuda's .32 into my belt, and grabbed the unconscious man.

I wrestled with him, pulled off the black robe that covered him, then jumped back to the door. Already, in the few seconds it had taken me, a couple men had started cautiously up the stairway. Not cautiously enough, however. I emptied Barracuda's .32 into them and at them. One of them fell backwards, the other ran.

It took me about five seconds to pull the black robe over me. Then I grabbed off the floor the hood which had been part of Barracuda's Executioner costume. With it over my head I could see through the eyeholes—not well, but at least the thing covered my painted-clown face, and the white hair. Some might soon wonder why the mask was being worn, but with luck there would be too much going on in a minute for clear thinking to take place. And it gave me a chance—a pretty good chance, I was beginning to believe.

I was even feeling halfway good again. Clammy and sweaty, and unhappy at the same time, but so keyed up that I felt almost as if I might dissolve into popping atoms. A glance out the office door showed me that another brave, or foolhardy, hood had started up the stairs. Behind him were a couple others, less daring. Fine. Now they could come up and shoot me.

I was grinning involuntarily under my black hood and grease paint as I turned and jumped back into the office, and then went on into the next room where the dead man still lay. The dead clown—Shell Scott.

Somebody had already mistaken the guy for me; why not again? I'd thought for a moment earlier, when I'd first seen him that he was a reflection of me; except for the switch in the color of his nose, and the buttons on his outfit, we had been clothed in almost identical fashion. And I was now dressed exactly as Barracuda had been, in the black robe and hood. It would have looked good, I thought, even to me.

There was so much adrenalin and thyroxin and pituitin and maybe vegetable soup in my veins by now that I lifted the dead clown clear up on my shoulder with no more effort than if I'd been lifting a sack of potatoes. Then I trotted heavily toward the door of this second room, the bedroom which opened at the head of those stairs. I got the door opened and staggered forward through it, my arms wrapped tightly around the dead clown's waist.

Past him I could see the three men, now at the head of the stairway. They all had pistols in their hands and two of them pointed the guns at me and the clown, but the other yelled something and they didn't fire. I couldn't see what they did then, because as soon as I toppled through the door clutching my clown, I fell forward to the floor at the head of the stairs, rolling, holding the dead man's arms tight to his sides.

As I reached the stairs I got my feet under me somehow and half raised up, pulling the clown along with me, muscles stretching painfully in my back and side, but I got him up far enough. His head fell backward limply, but I moved so fast that maybe nobody noticed. As his head dropped back I slammed a fist against his chin. He fell back loosely, like a rag man, toppling over the body of Jim Lester hitting the steps and starting to roll very slowly down to the next one.

This whole operation had taken only four or five seconds, and before he rolled more than an inch my .38 was in my hand. There was a hell of a lot of noise, a real pandemonium with voices and shouts and screams, and with the three men now behind me and a dozen more below coming up making a lot of racket, but at least those nearest me must have heard me shout hoarsely, with my voice as near to the rasping huskiness of Barracuda's as I could make it, "Kill that clown! I told you *he's Shell Scott!*" And I fired my last two .38 slugs into the

dead man's body.

Before I even poured the second one into him though, at least six other shots sounded. Three or four of the hoodlums helped me kill that slob, Shell Scott. So many guns fired almost at once there that for a few moments it sounded as if somebody were letting fly with a machine gun.

But all of a sudden there was nearly complete quiet. After the staccato bark and boom of guns, the silence was almost oppressive, heavy and thick. The dead man's body was still moving, turning slightly as it settled onto the lower step of the stairs, but then it stopped, was still. It looked as if he had just been shot, and suddenly stopped living. Right now everybody here thought that Barracuda had fought valiantly and fiercely, and just eliminated, with the help of a few other guns, that foul and much unloved private eye, Shell Scott.

In fact, one little hoodlum was looking down at the clown's body, with his mouth hanging open, and then he said, "You know, they was times when I thought that fink, Scott, would never get killed."

8.

I was starting to feel weak. A flush went over my skin, and then it got a little chilled. Man, my glands were about to give up in disgust. I'd no more let them get a little calmed down than something would happen to light their fuses again. And right now I was thinking about how far I still had to go to get out of this joint.

With my voice harsh and rasping in my throat I said, "Haul the jerk out back. I'll tell Nevada what happened."

And with that I walked on down the stairs. Nobody stopped me. I was still Barracuda, or Hacker, to them, walking out to the gate to tell the gateman what the score was. Nobody had yet asked why it was necessary for the black-robed Hacker to tell anybody at the gate anything. Or why I was wearing the hood over my head still—when it hadn't been on at the start of my battle, when "I" had appeared at the head of the stairs shouting "Kill that clown!" Everybody was still pretty well shaken up—and emotional rather than logical—for the moment.

I had told the men to carry the corpse out back, because I sure didn't want them going upstairs and finding the real Barracuda—and their host, Frank Quinn—sprawled out in Quinn's office. That was bound to happen sooner or later, but the later it happened, the sooner I'd like it. I walked through the softly muttering crowds, and my black-robed and black-hooded figure got a good many stares. Even among killers and burglars and thieves of all descriptions, a gun battle and killing is not usually the height of the festivities at a party. And all in black, I must have looked pretty creepy, anyway. Like Death striding among the revelers.

But I made it to the hall and down it to the front door, and outside. The air was cool; it felt like rain. I was wet with perspiration and the chill in the air transferred itself to my skin, and then my bones. I walked toward the rented Lincoln, feeling for the keys. I couldn't find them. In all the running around and fighting I might have lost them.

Several men had come out the door behind me. Some of the guests were undoubtedly preparing to leave, without even saying goodbye to the host—and that was just dandy with me; I didn't *want* them saying goodbye to their host. It might have looked odd for the real Barracuda to hop in a Lincoln to drive the short distance to the gate. Especially if he drove a Mercury, say. But that was a chance I was willing to take. Walking out of here on foot, however, was simply asking for it. Or it might lead to getting it without asking for it. But I kept fumbling in pockets, and at last my fingers closed around the metal key; it had been buried in a mass of the papers I'd stolen—at least I still had them.

In the Lincoln, I gunned to the gate and slid to a stop in front of it. A light on top of the gatehouse illumined the darkness around us for twenty or thirty yards. Nevada was just stepping out of the little house, the familiar shotgun in his hands. Only it wasn't in the crook of his arm this time; he held it at the ready, finger curled around the trigger, both barrels pointed at my head.

I looked out the car window toward him and the gun, and he just dissolved away out of my sight. All I could see was the round end of those two barrels, and for half a horrible second I thought he was going to shoot me. I thought he was going to blast my head off. Those two round holes of the shotgun muzzles seemed to swell in my sight until they looked like cannons aimed at me and I kept waiting for two eight-inch shells to fly out and pop me in the kisser.

Well, I thought, what a hell of a way to go. There won't be anything left of me. Just little shreds, and unidentifiable bits. Shell Scott will just disappear. But then I snapped out of my dizziness. There is something unnerving about a shotgun aimed at you. It can't kill you any more than a .22 pistol can, say, but it sure gives the impression that it can kill you deader.

Dust was still swirling from my sudden stop before the closed gate. Nevada said, "What in tarnation's goin' on? Somebody jest called up from the house and said nobody ain't to go in nor out."

So that meant I wouldn't be getting out through the gate for a while—not, at least, with Nevada's help. Looking beyond him into the gatehouse I could see the phone sitting on a wooden counter in there. Probably at this very moment, some of the party guests were ogling the unconscious Quinn, and Barracuda. That was probably what had caused the phone call to the gate.

I had to make a quick decision, so I swung open

the car door and stepped out, saying, "That's what I came out to tell you. Keep the gate closed, Nevada, and—"

He was squinting at me, and the shotgun was staring wide-eyed at me, and he said, "You ain't Hacker. What's your name, boy?"

"No," I said. "Hacker and me wound up with the same kind of outfit. I'm, uh, Whitey McGafford." Then I pulled off the hood and threw it back into the car. The clown paint was still smeared on my face. It must have puzzled Nevada, but that was O.K. with me; I wanted him puzzled for the next minute or so. And I was going to try to keep him off balance long enough for me to get a phone call out of here.

"McGafford," he said slowly. "I don't remember no—"

"Oh, shut up," I said. "Where's the phone? The boss is shot up and Dinky's dead, so cut the gab. I got to call somebody for the boss."

"Hey, wait a minute. Who's Dinky?"

"What difference does it make? He's dead," I said. And I didn't wait. Possibly I was still dizzy from looking into those eight-inch cannons, but the shotgun was back to normal size now and I walked past it into the gatehouse. I grabbed the phone, turned it so that Nevada couldn't see the numbers, and dialed the complaint board at the Police Building.

Nevada stepped into the doorway, about two yards from me, and moved the shotgun so that it pointed at my stomach. "Who you callin'?" he asked. And he didn't sound so puzzled now as just plain mean. "And what'd you say about the boss being shot?"

"I don't know all of what happened," I said roughly, "but there was a drunk in Quinn's office, and there was some kind of beef." Nevada's face smoothed out a little when I mentioned the drunk. He knew I was telling the truth about that—he'd talked to the drunk himself. "Frank's not hurt bad," I said, "but he wants nobody but Hotshot Dutton sticking a probe into him. Bullet's still in his side."

"You callin' who?" Nevada said.

"Hotshot." The timing was perfect. The officer at the complaint board had just answered, and I said it again, "Hotshot!" Looking at Nevada, I added, "Doctor Dutton, to you, the guy who's going to dig the bullets out of Frank Quinn and about thirty other guys here at Quinn's. How many times do I have to tell you?"

In the Police Building, the term Hotshot is applied to urgent calls which come in to the complaint board and are simultaneously transmitted to Homicide or Robbery and the Detective Headquarters Unit—and to the rolling radio cars—all at once, even while the call is coming in on the phone. They would all hear the next words I said—*if* I had made the officer understand what I wanted.

But Nevada was squinting at me again and he said, "Why didn't you use a phone in there?"

"I told you, there was a beef. They shot some clown that's supposed to be Shell Scott—"

"Hold it, boy." Nevada was looking mean again. "Just you back up from that phone. Lay it down."

He looked again as if he were going to use that double-barreled gun on me. I guessed that it was most likely loaded with double-ought buckshot, and what that won't do to a man isn't worth doing—if you want to kill him suddenly, that is. Each double-ought shotgun shell is loaded with nine pellets about the size of a .22 caliber slug. I thought of eighteen .22 bullets piling into my stomach, and I put the phone down, and backed up, just as he'd said to do.

Nevada held the shotgun with one hand and kept it aimed at me, then picked up the phone with the other. "Who's this I'm talkin' to?" he asked.

I held my breath, and tensed my leg muscles for a sudden jump.

"Huh?" he said. He looked at me, then said into the phone, "Doctor Dutton, huh? Well, Doctor, you hold on—"

I was almost grinning. A bright police officer on that complaint board was going to get a case of his favorite beverage from me—if I lived. And it was a big *If,* because Nevada had stopped talking for the same reason that I stopped almost grinning. There was a whole pile of racket from the house. I heard the sound of car engines racing—and then gunshots.

From my arrival in the Lincoln, skidding to a stop here, until now, probably only two minutes or at most three had gone by. But that had been time enough for somebody to figure out what had happened. Maybe somebody had even recognized that dead clown. Because I heard those shots hit the Lincoln. It would well have been that whoever was shooting thought I was still in the car, because about ten slugs hit it in the space of a few seconds. The lights of another car arced through the darkness, headed toward the gatehouse.

Nevada slammed the phone down onto the hook, then swung his head toward all the noise, and the racing car. The shotgun muzzle wavered away from me, and in that moment I jumped for him.

He let out a yell and started to jerk his head back toward me, but my right fist was driving for his face and it bounced off his chin, cutting off the startled shout. He staggered backward, dropping the gun, but the blow didn't knock him down. He was even tougher than he looked. Spitting out a mouthful of swear words he came at me, hands held in front of him the way a professional would hold them.

I didn't have time to box or fool around with Nevada. That car was already halfway to the gatehouse. So I let him hit me as I waded into him. I knew I'd be able to take at least a couple good

blows from those balled fists of his, but I was willing if I could get in a couple of my own. His left hand slammed my cheekbone like a hunk of rock; I felt the skin split and pain flamed like fire all over the side of my face. But I was in close to him, and as his other fist loomed before me, I gave him one hand in the gut, the way I'd dug Barracuda earlier, then tried to spread my fist all over his face. He reeled backward. His eyes were wide, but glassy. He was open, unprotected, his back against the counter behind him, and I hit him so hard in the stomach I thought my knuckles were going to slice clear in and bang the counter.

He let out a funny, high sound, but he didn't know he was making it. Nevada was still sliding down along the counter to the floor when I bent over and picked up the shotgun, jumped to the door of the gatehouse. Outside, that car was starting to swing in and stop. I raised the gun and fired one barrel, snapping the shot off without good aim. But the slugs tore up the radiator and far side of the car's windshield.

If I hit anybody, it wasn't the driver. He spun the wheel and slid around to the right, away from me. I could have pumped slugs from the second shell into him as he went by—but for all I knew, that was the only load I had left, so I held my fire. The car, a dark Cadillac, bounced off the parked Lincoln's rear bumper but kept on going, then roared back toward the house and stopped about halfway to it.

Another car was coming toward me, and men on foot were heading my way too. From the darkness I saw fire flash as somebody shot at the gatehouse. The slug splatted against the glass—but didn't come through. The bullet-proof glass pitted and slivered, but that was all.

I swung around, looking for the lever that controlled the gate. Only one was visible and I pushed it, then pulled it. The gate started sliding open. I looked around for a gun, any kind of gun, or shells for the shotgun. None were in sight. And there was no way, as far as I could tell, to lock the gatehouse door. Maybe the glass was bullet proof, but I wasn't, and I had the miserable feeling that pretty soon I was going to prove it.

A couple more slugs splatted against the window. Now I could see half a dozen men between the house and me. They were trotting toward me, and getting too close for comfort. There was no help for it. I had to use that last load in the shotgun. But this time I meant to aim.

I did aim. I did it fast, because I was exposed myself while getting the shot off, but I aimed. First I made sure the gate was open, because after my one shot the gun would be nothing but a club, and I meant to be running as lightly burdened as possible. And I ripped the black robe so it wouldn't bind my legs. Then I stepped outside the house and sighted along the barrels right at the middle of the loose group of men now only about twenty yards away. As the gun centerd on one man I squeezed off the shot and then dropped flat on the ground.

About five shots answered mine, but the slugs whistled over my head, one glancing off the small house. And then I was on my feet, spinning around and running, bent over, out through the gate, headed down the road into darkness. I'd started moving too suddenly after firing to keep my eyes on the target, but my aim had been good. Somebody out there behind me screamed like a terrified woman, high and piercing.

That one last shell I'd used, and the man's cry, gave me about five seconds' start. It wasn't much. And I knew it wasn't going to be enough. But it got me through the gate and started out the road toward darkness, head down and legs pumping. I never ran faster. But then the firing started again. They could see me fairly well, because the light from the gate touched me still—and now I could hear a car coming at me from behind. Its lights, too, fell on me and swept past me. They just opened up all at once. One bullet whistled by my ear. I heard another hiss along the road and whine high into the air. My lungs were burning, starting to ache. Then one of the slugs hit me.

It sliced into my thigh, as if somebody had kicked me there. All of a sudden it was as if my leg was gone. I went down hard, the breath whooshing out of my mouth. My head cracked against the road. I was stunned, the hard asphalt burning into the skin of my arm and face, but I managed to throw my arms out and stop rolling, barely off the asphalt in the graveled dirt along its edge.

The fall, more than anything else, dazed me. My head had cracked against the street hard enough to send black and white dots swirling in front of my eyes. But I was still conscious. Half conscious, maybe, but not out. I could hear their running feet, I thought—but it seemed, too, as if I heard a siren.

I tried to remember if I'd gotten the call through to the complaint board. I was too dazed to remember. Guns cracked again and a bullet snipped at my clothing. I rolled farther from the road, trying to clear my brain and eyes, trying to see. Everything was blurred, out of focus. I knew the men were running at me, getting close; a car was coming toward me. I swore, raging, wanting my gun, wanting even that empty shotgun to use as a club. I wanted a machine gun, a bow and arrow, *anything,* just so I could get back at these bloodthirsty bums who were running me down and getting ready to kill me. But I couldn't even get up off my rear end, couldn't get my feet under me or clear my brain enough to know what was happening.

Lights flashed around me suddenly. I saw a pulsing red light. And then I heard the siren and knew it was a police siren, a radio car. There was another burst of gunfire, but none of the bullets seemed to come my way. My sight cleared, and my

head suddenly began pounding as if Fury were in there and trying to get out. Another siren was wailing almost in my ear. One radio car had stopped near me and a second was just cutting around it, heading toward the gate.

A uniformed police sergeant loped toward me, bent over. His gun was in his right hand, glinting in the light, and pointed at me. I suddenly remembered my unrecognizable paint-smeared face and said, "Hold it, I'm Shell Scott."

"You're Shell Scott?"

"Yeah, I called you—"

He interrupted me. I guess he thought from the look of my face, that I'd been shot freely about the head. But in quick sentences I told him what had happened, what was going on. He left me at the side of the road and raced to his car, said something to the driver. I heard them radioing in, but I didn't pay much attention. Dizziness was sweeping over me.

Then the sergeant was back. A few terse questions from him got the rest of the story out of me. I told him about Quinn, Barracuda, the dead clown, the numerous hoods who were present even now. And about the papers I'd stuffed into my coat pockets. Some of them were still there. Others were scattered over the countryside—but they could be picked up. Sirens dinned in our ears as two more police cars approached.

I said, "About that clown, he was undoubtedly killed by mistake by a hood named Barracuda—I mean, Hacker. After he was dead, I shot him twice and a half a dozen or so hoods shot him, too. So your crime lab can compare the bullets in him with the guns on the premises and—"

"What?"

"—and hold those crooks for mutilating a corpse, if nothing else. The jail's going to be crowded." I lay down flat on the dirt. I was pooped. I was all tuckered out.

"You all right?" the sergeant asked.

"Yeah. They got me in the leg. I don't think it's bad."

"Let me take a look." He bent over me, used his flashlight. I heard cloth tearing. "Nothing," he said. "You'll walk on it in no time. Hey," he grinned down at me.

"Yeah?"

"We caught you in our headlights as we came down. Thought you were crazy. There was a car coming at you—they went off the road over there." he pointed. "And about five or six guys running at you with guns. You know what you were doing?"

"Throwing up?"

He laughed. "No, you were sitting on your fanny and throwing rocks at them. Or I guess it was those little pebbles." He kicked some of the gravel I was lying on.

It struck me funny, and I chuckled. Then I grinned back at him and said, "Well, I knew they were going to shoot me—but by gad I was going to make them pay!"

"Sure, Scott. Take it easy."

"And it wasn't pebbles. You think I'm crazy? It was rocks. I took them out of my head."

"You better just rest there, Scott," he said, and walked back to the car.

And that's what I did.

9.

That, of course, was just about all of it. Except the mopping up. I got an ambulance ride to the Georgia Street Receiving Hospital. It was possible that, in all the excitement, I didn't explain to the police as well as I might have just what was going on at Frank Quinn's party. But as it turned out, only one officer was shot, and even he wasn't hurt seriously. Two more of the hoodlum guests were wounded seriously enough to require hospitalization, but the rest were herded together and taken down to the police building without undue trouble.

All of the guests were booked, on suspicion of half the crimes in the book, and there was little that even their smart lawyers could do about it, since there were already two corpses on the premises when the police arrived: Jim Lester, and the clown—who turned out to be just a poor safe-man who'd happened to wear a clown outfit. I later learned from Barracuda that the clown had been in the room adjoining Quinn's office with a little brunette when Barracuda walked in on them; from the outfit, and the brunette, and the way they were carrying on, Barracuda had just automatically assumed that the guy was Shell Scott.

Also bleeding on the premises when the police arrived, were the man I'd plugged in the leg, the one I'd drilled with Barracuda's .32 and the guy I'd peppered with double-ought buckshot. In the room with the still unconscious Frank Quinn and Barracuda was of course, Quinn's open safe, the contents of which the police could thus quite legitimately examine. That led to a large number of indictments, among which the indictment of Quinn himself was almost incidental.

My first night in the hospital, before conking out for a good sleep, I made sure that I got the straight story on Ross Miller. The info I'd stuffed into my pockets, and the other stuff found in Quinn's safe, was enough to indicate that Miller had been framed by Quinn. It was certain that in the next few days the proof one way or another would be forthcoming. You can always postpone an execution; but you can't undo one. Under the circumstances the governor had no choice. He granted the stay.

While I was still in the hospital, some of Quinn's associates broke down and spilled all they knew about him, including details of Quinn's payoffs through K. C. Flagg—and his ordering the murder

of little Weiss. And then, with Quinn safely locked up, blonde Lucy Dale admitted that Quinn had *not* been with her at the time of Flagg's murder, but had forced her to provide him with an alibi to explain his known presence at the Whitestone on that night of November 20.

So it was obvious that Frank Quinn was all washed up; not only did it look as if he would be made for the Flagg murder, but he was tagged for the killing of Weiss. And that finished the clearing of Ross Miller. The machinery for his release started grinding, and the day I got out of the hospital, he was scheduled to be freed. It seemed like nice timing.

I left the hospital, hale and hearty, on a Friday afternoon. It was a bright day, with a sharp nip in the air. Invigorating. Bracing. I felt good. And I felt like seeing Doris Miller. I drove to her apartment.

Nobody was there. And then I realized that it was almost the hour when Ross Miller was to be released. Naturally his sister would be on hand to welcome him. Fortunately, so could I be, if I hurried. The prisoner had already been transferred from San Quentin to the jail in L.A.'s Police Building, from which he was about to be released. I jumped into the Cad and made time back downtown. I hurried at just the right rate of speed so that I got there as Ross Miller was enfolding his sister in his arms, while flashbulbs popped and reporters hovered. I hovered with them. Let Ross and Doris, I thought, have their moment.

But it was more than a moment, and gradually it occurred to me that this egg did not seem to be kissing Doris the way a brother kisses a sister. They came up for air, as the saying goes, and then went back down in the carbon dioxide. More flashbulbs popped.

It took me a couple minutes, I guess, to work my way over close to them and attract Doris' attention. When she saw me, her lips parted and her blue eyes got very wide. Those eyes which I'd thought a little strange when we'd met. She gasped.

Ross Miller, his arm around her waist, looked at me. He was a tall, dark, character with a thin mustache and several pounds of black wavy hair. "Who's this slob, honey?" he asked Doris.

She didn't answer him. Looking at my chin she said, "Shell . . . ah, I . . . there's something I didn't tell you."

I got it then, finally, but all of a sudden, as if I were belatedly telepathic. And oddly enough, right at the same moment I figured out what was wrong with those bright blue eyes of Doris Miller's—or whatever her name was. She never looked at me. Never looked at my eyes, that is. She had always looked at my chin, as she was now; or my ear, or shoulder, or off into space. Never straight and clean and true, into my eyes. That was because she'd been lying to me from the beginning.

"I'm sorry, Shell," she said, looking at my collar bone. "It . . . well, I had to have help. And Weiss *had* talked to me just the day before. I didn't think if I told you who I really was that you would . . ."

She was having a hard time getting the words out. "Skip it," I said. And then I added to myself, "Brother, I am sure the world's greatest detective. I'm Sherlock Holmes and Javert all wrapped up in Li'l Abner. What a thinker! I should never have thrown away all those rocks . . ."

I went down to the street and got into my Cad, started it and headed out the Hollywood Freeway toward home. Life, I thought, is cruel. Life is shallow. Life is lifeless. I thought all sorts of things like that until I reached the Spartan Apartment Hotel. As I passed the desk, the clerk called my name and then handed me a stack of mail.

I glanced at it on the way up to the second floor. Bills mostly. Bills—there was a letter from the Twenty-Centuries Costume Center.

It was a nice, pleasant not-very-businesslike letter saying that the firm had enjoyed doing business with me and hoped that everything was satisfactory. The last sentence was, "Please remember that we have the largest private stock of costumes in Hollywood—including many special costumes for special occasions." And it was signed, Marie.

At the bottom of the letter was a short P.S., "As in Antoinette."

In less than fifteen minutes I was walking into the Twenty-Centuries Costume Center. The little honey blonde was behind the counter reading a magazine. I didn't look at the title; enough of my illusions had already been shattered this day, and it would have been too much to bear if she had been reading about Donald Duck.

She looked up. "Well, hello," she said musically. She was in the harem costume again. Or still. Maybe she always wore it in the shop. She did if the boss was smart.

"Hi," I said. "I ruined the clown outfit I rented. I had a hunch that might happen, remember?"

She nodded, looking at me from those soft brown eyes. Looking *at* my eyes. Obviously she had nothing to hide. And she wasn't making much effort to hide it.

I went on, "Are you Marie?"

She laughed. "Oh, you got my note. Well . . . I just signed it Marie for fun. You know, for a joke?"

"I see. That's dandy. Yes, that's good."

"My name isn't really Marie. It's actually—"

"Woops. What do you say, for a while anyway, we just leave it Marie?"

"As in Antoinette."

Yes, I was thinking, I'd had it all wrong a little while ago. Life is not cruel and shallow and lifeless. It is indeed the very opposite, chock full of goodness. It's all in your point of view. Life is exciting, exhilarating, wonderful—especially at costume parties. From now on, that is.

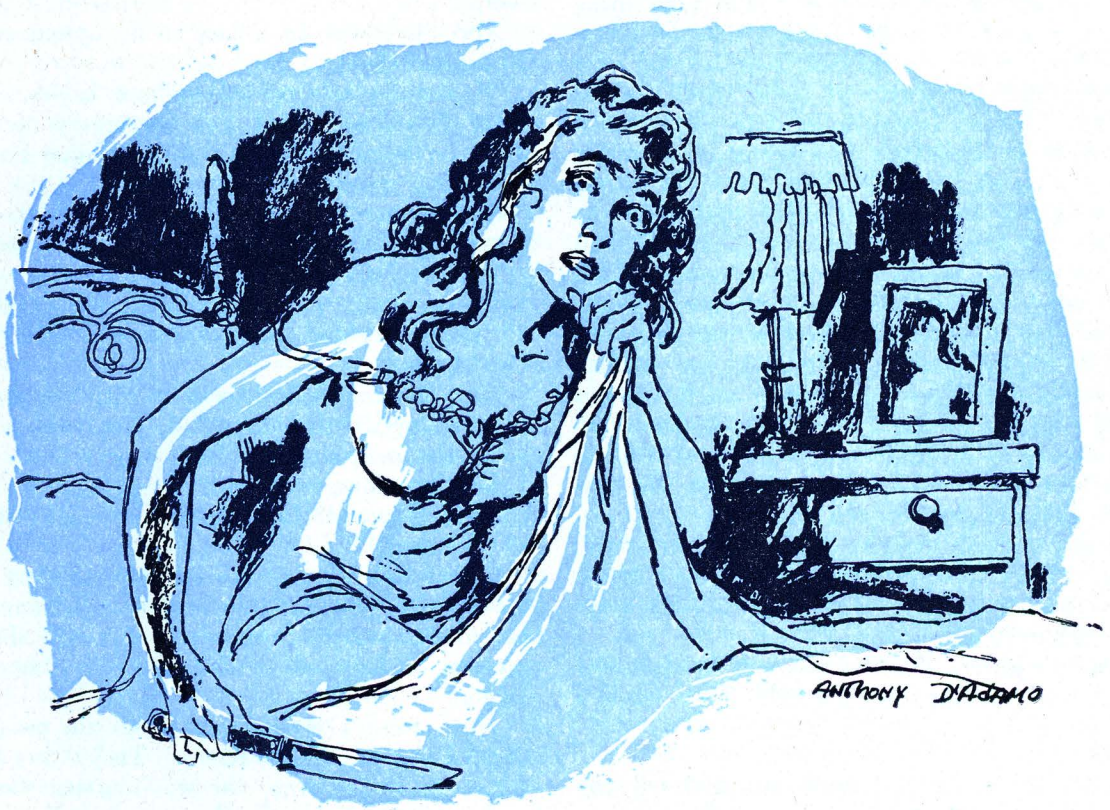
And I was right.

RUTH had never been in a courtroom before. It was exciting—like something from a movie or the television. She paused just inside the doorway, the matron at her side, and as she did so the flashbulbs began to explode, and all the people in the room turned to stare at her. For just a moment she was startled and embarrassed. One hand automatically tugged at the front of her blue wool suit jacket—it had a way of riding up since she'd put on weight. Not that Ruth was plump. Her figure was good—too good for comfort, because Ruth, although she'd trained herself to conceal it, was excessively shy. But she was also feminine. She tugged at the jacket, and then she brushed a wisp of blonde hair from her forehead—and all of this with such a well-practised concealment of emotion that the caption writers would be dusting off such phrases as "stony-faced tigress" and "iceberg killer" to fit under those pictures in the afternoon editions. By this time the flashbulbs had stopped exploding, and a policeman was clearing the way.

Ruth walked forward to the table where Mr. Jennings was waiting for her. He pulled out her chair and smiled.

"Good morning, Miss Kramer. You're looking well this morning."

Ruth didn't answer. She sat down, and then Mr. Jennings sat down beside her and began to fuss with some papers in his brief case. Mr. Jennings was rather shy himself—and nervous. Ruth had



DECISION

by

HELEN NIELSEN

Ruth wasn't worried. She was only on trial for her life.

heard it remarked that this was his first capital case, which accounted for the nervousness. Public Defender. She ran the words over in her mind. They had a good sound. This man was going to defend her from the public. No, that wasn't what the words really meant. Ruth knew. She'd learned a great many in her thirty-odd years, and she knew what just about all the words meant; but that's the way they sounded to her when she ran them over in her mind. She liked Mr. Jennings. He reminded her of Allan. Younger and more serious, but just as neat. That was the important thing. His white shirt was freshly laundered, his narrow tie was clipped in place, and his suit must have just come from the pressers. He was clean shaven and smelled of one of those lotions the ad writers call brisk and masculine.

But staring at Mr. Jennings would only make him more nervous. Ruth looked about the courtroom. The jury was in the box, their assorted faces wearing different degrees of strain. Ruth's bland face concealed an inner smile. The jury seemed even more nervous than Mr. Jennings. It might have been on trial instead of her. Then she turned and looked at the spectators. No trial since the Romans fed live dinners to the lions had been complete without them. The public—society. That was a word that amused her even more than the faces of the jury—society. There it was in its assembled might, neither frightening nor particularly offended. Curious was a better word. Curious society awaiting its cue to acquit or condemn, because society never knew until it was told what to do. It was like a huge mirror in which one saw not one reflection, but that of a crowd.

If I smiled, Ruth thought, *they would smile back. If I waved my hand, they would wave their hands. They never do anything of themselves. They never act; they only re-act.*

That was society, and she was outside of it now because she'd broken the first rule. She'd made a decision . . .

Everybody in the neighborhood could tell you how devoted Ruth Kramer was to her parents. Such a good girl. Such a hard worker. Such a good provider since poor old Mr. Kramer had to stop working. There wasn't a mother on the block who didn't envy Mrs. Kramer's relationship with her daughter. Not many young people were so thoughtful. Not many cared so much. Everybody in the neighborhood could tell you everything they knew about Ruth Kramer—which was nothing.

Ruth couldn't remember when she'd started hating her father. It might have been the time when she was five and caught him killing the puppies. They were new-born and hardly aware of life, and maybe it was the only thing to do with times so hard and food so short; but it was horrible to watch him toss their bodies, still warm and wriggling, into the post-holes he'd been digging for the back fence. It was even more horrible to hear him boast about it later.

"Six-post-holes, six puppies at the bottom. I saved myself all that work of digging graves."

"Otto, don't talk about it. Not in front of the child," Anna Kramer would say.

"Why not talk about it? She has to learn to save—work, money. Nobody can waste anything in life."

Otto Kramer had a simple philosophy. He never questioned life; he never argued with it. "A bed to sleep on, a table to eat on, a stove to cook on—what more do you need?" A very simple philosophy. Worry and fear belonged in a woman's world, and he had no sympathy for either. If Ruth had tears she could shed them in her mother's thin, tight arms. There was no other warmth in the world.

And there was no money to be wasted on the foolishness of pain.

"A woman is supposed to have babies. That's what she's made for. I ain't got money to throw away on hospital bills. It's all foolishness anyway. It's all in a woman's mind."

Otto Kramer spoke and that was law. Anna never argued with her husband. She just grew thin and pale and cried a great deal when he was away, and when her time came it wasn't all in her mind after all. Hidden behind the pantry door, a child heard everything.

"You thick-skulled old-country men ought to be horse-whipped!" the doctor said. "You lost a son for your stinginess, and you damned near lost a wife! Leave her alone now until she gets her strength back—understand? Leave her alone or I'll take care of you myself!"

Crouched in the darkness behind the pantry door, Ruth didn't understand—except that in some way her mother was in danger from this man she was growing to hate and needed protection. She never forgot.

There were a great many things the neighbors didn't know about Ruth Kramer. They didn't know, for instance, that when she was fourteen she slept with a knife hidden under her pillow. Nobody knew that. Not even her mother. But Ruth had watched and guarded for a long time, and by that time the quarreling and night noises beyond the paper-thin walls had taken on a strange and ominous significance. The knife was for her fear—a nameless fear that was doomed to silence.

Anna Kramer didn't like to talk about such things.

"Forget the silly things you hear, child. It's not for you to worry about."

But Ruth wasn't a child. She was fourteen. At fourteen it seems there should be an end to misery.

"Why don't you get a divorce?" she asked.

Divorce! A shocking word. Where had she gotten such an idea? Divorce was a sin! It seemed to Ruth

that perpetual unhappiness was an even greater sin; but she didn't have a chance to argue the point. The tight, thin arms were about her again, closing out the world. She mustn't think of such things. She had her schoolwork to think about, and that scholarship—

Ruth didn't win the scholarship. She suffered a breakdown and couldn't even finish the semester; but in a way, her sickness was a good thing. It gave her time to think things out. There had to be a reason for all this unhappiness, and there had to be a way out. If only they weren't so poor. If only there was a little extra money to fix up the house and have friends and live the way other people lived. Ruth thought it all out and then put the knife back in the knife drawer because it was foolishness, even if it was a sign of rebellion. She knew a better way.

There was no trouble about going back to school. School was an extravagance and a waste on a female. Work was good. Work kept young people out of trouble.

"I went to work when I was twelve years old," Otto Kramer said. "Fifteen hours a day and a straw pallet in the back of the shop. I had no time for racing around in old cars and playing jazz records all night like young people do nowadays. Hoodlums! Nothing but hoodlums!"

Ruth didn't argue. The old cars and the jazz records weren't to be a part of her life anyway. There was no time. Work was for days and study was for evenings, because her father was wrong about education. He was wrong about a lot of things, but she didn't argue about any of them. Arguments and quarreling were a waste of time. She learned to withdraw from them—to tune out the voices behind the wall at night, just as she tuned up the music on her bedside radio. But she always listened with half an ear, and she never forgot to watch. And she never forgot her plan. Every problem had to have a solution, and she was going to find the solution for happiness. Otto Kramer's house remained a fortress from without; but within, it began to change. The floors were carpeted, the windows curtained, a plumber installed a new sink, and the ice-man didn't have to stop by after the refrigerator was delivered. The plan began to work. Anna Kramer's face learned how to smile; but Otto's remained grim.

"Foolishness! Damn foolishness! Throw money around like that and you'll be sorry!"

And just to prove his point, he lost his job and never did get around to finding another one.

It might have been then that Ruth Kramer began to hate her father; but for the next few years she was too busy to think about it. Every problem had to have a solution. She did her positive thinking and took another course at night school. After that, she got a better job with longer hours. The problem was still there, but there wasn't so much time to think about it. What was happiness anyway? How many people ever knew? When the quarrelling was especially bad, and the tears too heavy—Ruth could never bear to hear her mother cry—she could set a balance again with flowers sent as a surprise, or some new piece for the shelf of china miniatures Anna Kramer so loved. And there was always the music to be turned up louder so the neighbors wouldn't hear. From the outside, everything was lovely. Nobody ever went into the house but the three people who lived inside, enduring one another while the years piled up behind them like a stack of unpaid bills. And everything in life had to be paid for sooner or later. Far back in her mind, crowded now with more knowledge than she could ever use, Ruth knew that.

The bills began coming due when she met Allan.

She'd never thought about men. They were in her world; but they were only names on the doors of offices, or voices answering the telephone. They sat behind desks that always held a photograph of the wife and children, and they sometimes paid compliments and gave raises.

"I wish we had more employees like you, Miss Kramer. I never have to worry about how you're going to do your work."

That kind of compliment—never anything about her hair-do, which was severe and neat, or her suits, which were tailored to conceal her thinness and build up her bustline. Men were hands on desktops, voices on the telephone, and signatures on a paycheck. They were the office wolf to be ignored, the out of town customer to be kidded, and the serious young man who missed his mother to be gently brushed aside. And a dour old man who now sat at home in his chair in the corner like a pile of dirty rags.

But Allan Roberts wasn't any of these things. Allan was that old bill coming due. If she'd known, she wouldn't have been so pleased when he called her into his office that first day.

"I like the way you work, Miss Kramer. You must have been with the company a long time."

A new engineer with top rating, and he'd noticed her out of the whole office staff. Ruth was flattered.

"Twelve years," she admitted; wishing, for some reason, that it didn't sound so long.

"Good. You know more about procedure than I do. You're just the assistant I need on this hotel job."

That's how it started—strictly business. But it was a big job—an important job. It meant long hours with late dinners in some hole-in-the-wall restaurant, with a juke box wailing and a lot of talk and laughter to ease the strain of a hard, tense job. It meant work on Sunday, with Allan's convertible honking at the curb, and Ruth hurrying out before he had time to come to the door. And, eventually, it meant talk at home.

"You're with this man an awful lot," Anna Kramer said.

"He's nice," Ruth admitted. "And smart. I'm learning a lot on this job."

"He looks nice. He dresses nice."

"He's got a responsible job. He has to dress nice."

"Your father used to dress nice. I'll never forget when I met him—silk shirts, derby hat, walking stick."

"My father?"

"Handsome, too. I remember thinking that I'd never seen such a handsome man—and such big ideas for the future."

They'd never talked like this before. Anna Kramer's eyes were far away; then they met Ruth's and changed the subject.

"I suppose you'll be working Sunday."

"I suppose I will," Ruth said.

"We'll miss church again."

"I keep telling you, you should make friends with the neighbors and go with them."

Anna sighed. Her eyes found the miniatures on the shelf.

"You know how your father feels about neighbors. I don't like to start a fuss and get you upset when we have such a nice home now."

Ruth worked Sunday. She worked many Sundays, and then, as much as she dreaded it, the job ended.

"But we're invited to the opening," Allan said. "When shall I pick you up?"

She hadn't counted on that. Working with Allan was fun. Dinner in those small cafes was fun. But a hotel opening wasn't like a concert, or a lecture, or a class at evening school.

"I suppose it's formal," she hedged.

"I hope so. You'll be a knockout in an evening gown."

He was kidding her, of course. Allan was a great kidder. Still, she didn't like to refuse. It might even jeopardize her job. She took a lunch hour for shopping, because she'd never owned an evening dress. That was when she became the last person to be aware of what had been going on under those tailored suits all the years. Allan wasn't kidding.

Cinderella went to the ball. Poor Cinderella, who was always losing things. A dance floor wasn't much good to a collector of Bach, but Allan was gallant.

"I might as well be honest," he said. "It doesn't show because I have my shoes made to order, but I've got two left feet. Let's see how the terrace looks in the moonlight."

The terrace looked the way all terraces look in the moonlight. Ruth was trembling when she pulled away from him. They hadn't taught her anything like that in night school. But she was embarrassed, too. He must have known. He could go back to the office and tell stories in the washroom about how he'd frightened that straight-laced Miss Kramer who was so efficient in so many other things.

"You live with your parents, don't you?"

She expected that. She didn't have to answer. She already felt alone.

"I mean, you don't have any other ties to hold you here?"

She didn't expect that.

"To hold me?"

"There's a new contract coming up in Mexico City. A big one—six months, maybe a year. I'm getting the assignment, and I'd like to have you come along. I think we work well together."

She didn't expect that at all. Mexico City. A Latin beat from the dance floor came up behind them, a deep, throbbing rhythm, and Ruth began to hear it for the first time. To hear it, and feel it, with a stirring and churning starting inside her as if something were being born.

And she could feel Allan's eyes smiling in the darkness.

"I think you'd like Mexico," he said. "I think the change will do you good. Anyway, you've got a couple of weeks to decide."

It was much after mid-night when Cinderella came home from the ball. She stopped humming at the doorway and let herself in quietly; but she needn't have been so cautious. As soon as she switched on the lights, she saw her mother huddled in the wing-chair.

"You didn't have to wait up—" she began, and then she saw her mother's face. "What is it? What's wrong?"

The face of a martyr taking up the cross.

"Nothing," Anna answered. "Nothing for you to worry about."

"Nothing? Then why aren't you in bed?"

Haunted eyes looked at her. A thin hand tugged at the throat of a worn robe, and the sleeve fell back to show an ugly bruise.

"Mother—!"

"Go to bed," Anna said. "You had a nice time, didn't you? Go to bed and don't worry about me."

"But you've been hurt!"

"It doesn't matter. It's happened before."

"*He* did it!"

An anger flared up as old as a knife tucked away under a pillow.

"Don't—don't talk so loud! He's asleep now."

"But you don't have to put up with this! You don't have to live with him!"

Anna's eyes swept the room. A beautiful room—perfect, like the miniatures on the shelf. The home she'd always wanted. Some plans did work.

"Maybe he's sick," Ruth said. "Maybe if he saw a doctor—"

"You know what your father thinks of doctors."

"But if he's violent—"

Anna wore a sad smile.

"I told you—it's nothing. It's happened before. You would have noticed if you weren't always so busy. He's an old man, that's all. An old man gets

angry when—when he can't do what he used to do."

Anna fell silent. There was shame in her eyes for having almost spoken of the forbidden subject. She got up out of the chair and started toward the hall.

"You're not going back there?"

The sad smile came back.

"I told you—it's nothing. I shouldn't have said anything and ruined your good time. Go to bed now. It's all right. As long as I have you, everything is all right."

The arms closed about Ruth's shoulders in a goodnight embrace. Nothing . . . nothing . . . Ruth turned out the lamp when she was gone and sat alone in the darkness. Nothing . . . She began to tremble.

Ruth didn't go to Mexico City. At the office, her breakdown was written off to overwork on the hotel job. When she returned, Allan was gone. He never came back. For a time there was an empty place where he had been, a kind of misty pitfall with a mental sign in front of it: "Keep Away—Danger," and then the emptiness began to fill up with odds and ends of more work, more books, a course in clay modelling, and a season's ticket to the symphony. At home she played the music louder to drown out the endless quarrelling, and learned not to mention separation, or a doctor, or doing anything at all.

On her thirtieth birthday, Ruth bought her first bottle of whiskey. She kept it in a closet where her mother wouldn't find it. Good people, who didn't do sinful things—such as not facing problems—didn't drink. The bottle helped on the long nights when sleep wouldn't come. A little later, she dropped the modelling class because she'd lost interest in it, and the homework was cluttering up her room, and she had to stop going to the concerts because they made her nervous. But she couldn't sit around the house watching the slow death come. She drove out nights, and in time found a hole-in-the-wall bar where a three piece combo wandered deep into the wild nowhere, and a sad singer sobbed out the woes of the shadow people, who feel no pain and dream old dreams that never come true because they live in the land of no decision.

There were objections, of course.

"I wish you wouldn't go out so much alone," Anna Kramer said; "especially at nights."

Ruth laughed. She laughed a lot lately.

"Alone? How else could I go?"

The hurt look, and then—

"We used to take such nice rides on Sunday."

"I'll take you for a ride on Sunday."

"But every night—out. Honestly, I don't know what to make of you any more. You'd think I had enough trouble with your father!"

"Oh, God—!"

Then a door would slam, the music go loud, and she'd dig the bottle out of the closet.

The trouble at the office was a long time coming. It wasn't her fault. Everything cluttered, everything a mess. The youngsters were coming in—fresh and eager and green. No use trying to teach them anything. They knew it all. It got so that Ruth hardly talked to anyone except the clown in the sales department who told ribald jokes and made her laugh without knowing why. The trouble was a long time coming, but it came suddenly when it arrived. With gloves, of course. Working too hard. Too much responsibility. Not a demotion, understand, but the hours will be shorter and, of course, the pay. Ruth understood. The strange thing was how little she cared.

She didn't go home after work. She drove around for a few hours, and then drifted back to that hole in the wall where the shadows moaned, and crouched, and waited. Now it seemed that they were waiting for her—that this was the destiny she'd been bound for all these years. This was what came of hiding behind pantry doors and trembling in the darkness with a knife under her pillow. She knew what was wrong. She couldn't bury it in the books or try to hide it in the bottom of an empty bottle any more. It crawled inside her like a worm of dread, and there was only one way to get rid of it. She ordered a double whisky to steel her nerve.

The shadow people moved about her with hungry faces. At first she'd come only to watch them; now she belonged. She had only to give the sign. They were waiting. One, in particular, a dark, dirty, unshaven man.

They went out together. They drove to a dark street—dead end. It seemed appropriate.

No preliminaries. This wasn't a high school prom. He knew what she wanted. His mouth closed over hers, and his hands began tearing at her blouse. Ruth shuddered. The stirring that had started with Allan's kiss was churning up like an angry sea. A wall was crumbling. A high wall, a high tower—

But her hands were pushing him away.

He clawed at her, swearing softly. She pushed him back against the door.

"You crazy bitch!"

He came at her again, ugly and cruel. She saw his face dimly—unshaven, leering, smelling of liquor and filth. All of her strength went into her lunge. He fell backward against the door handle. It opened, spilling him out in the street. She had the motor started by the time he'd scrambled to his feet. The headlights caught him for one wild moment as she backed away—an angry and bewildered man, muttering curses and fumbling at his trousers.

She drove blindly, half sobbing. When it was far enough behind, she parked and sat alone in the darkness. The wall had started to crumble, and when a thing started it had to go on until it was done. She smashed the "Danger" sign in her mind and stared deep into the emptiness that was Allan's.

Allan was gone. Allan would never come back. She'd never hear his laughter, or see the way his eyes crinkled, or feel that second kiss that had made all the difference. But the world wasn't over. There was other laughter and other eyes, and there *was* a difference! There *had* to be!

But before she could find it, there was one thing she must do. One thing for certain.

She drove home, noticing for the first time how the hedges had become shaggy and how the lawn had turned brown. There were so many things to do, and never enough time. She went into the house. Her father sat in his chair in the corner like a heap of dirty rags. Her mother looked up with anxious eyes. She hurried past them to her room. One thing she *must* do . . .

"Ruth! What are you doing? Where are you going?"

One suitcase was enough. The furniture, the lamps, the books didn't matter. Let the dead bury the dead. One suitcase and tomorrow was enough.

"Why are you packing? What's happened? What's wrong?"

No answers. No explanations. No trouble. Ruth closed the suitcase and started toward the door. They were there, both of them. The woman and the old man. Bewildered, frightened. She tried to get through the door without speaking, but they blocked the way.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"Leaving? For a trip? On business?"

"Forever," Ruth said.

"But why? What have I done?"

Tears were welling up in the woman's eyes. Ruth couldn't bear tears. She tried to push past. Her father was in the way.

"Who do you think you are?" he demanded. "You answer your mother!"

"There is no answer."

"You be careful now! You ain't so damn smart as you think. You ain't no better than us! You'll end up in the gutter like I always said!"

He shouldn't have said it—not ever, but especially not then. An ugly, dirty, unshaven old man. She looked at him and trembled, and then it started again—the shuddering, the churning inside.

"Let me go!" she gasped.

He tried to push her back into the room. He slapped her across the face, and the wall was crumbling again. She had the suitcase in her hand. She swung with all her might. She heard him go down, and then the ugly, evil face was gone . . .

"Ruth—what have you done?"

He was on the floor—quiet and bleeding.

"Your own father! You've struck down your own father!"

Anna knelt beside him, cradling his bleeding head in her arms.

"Otto! Otto, are you alive? *Liebchen*—"

Ruth stared at them. The woman sobbing, her head bowed and her tight, thin arms, cradling him closer and closer to her breast. Her child. Her broken child caught up in the great-mother-lust, that subtle rape from which there is no escape save one . . .

And the wall was crumbling so that Ruth's breath came in great, silent sobs. When a thing started it had to be finished, one way or another. She moved slowly toward her mother.

The murmur of voices in the courtroom silenced and everybody rose as the judge came to the bench. A handsome, dignified man graying at the temples. Stern and fatherly. He sat down, and everybody sat down. It was about to begin. Exciting. Just like in the movies.

And then a man came across the room and bent down to whisper in Mr. Jennings ear. Mr. Jennings looked happy. He turned to Ruth.

"Good news!" he said. "Your father has regained consciousness. He's ready to testify that he struck you first—that you retaliated in self-defense."

Of course, Ruth thought. *Somebody has to look after him.*

"That gives you a good chance of getting off completely. We should have little trouble proving that your mother's death was accidental. Everybody knows how devoted you were."

For just a moment Ruth felt the quick stab of panic; and then her poise returned and she sat back quietly. The jury—only faces in a mirror. She'd never let them acquit her. Nobody was going to send her back to that house now that she'd made her decision.

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"Seven is your number," the judge told Haynes. "Now it's your turn to roll, and if we hit seven you're going to jail for 60 days."

Haynes rolled the dice and they came up ten. The judge fined Haynes $25 and costs.

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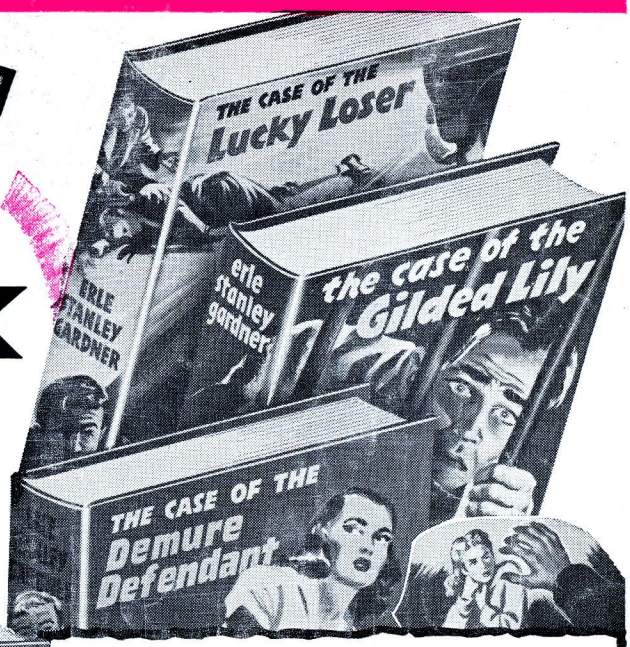

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